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# LACAN AND CONTEMPORARY FILM

EDITED BY

TODD McGOWAN

and

SHEILA KUNKLE

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# *Contributors*

**Paul Eisenstein** teaches literature and film in the English department at Otterbein College, Columbus, Ohio, and is the author of *Traumatic Encounters: Holocaust Representation and the Hegelian Subject* (SUNY Press, 2003).

**Anna Kornbluh** is currently a student in the Ph.D. program in comparative literature at University of California, Irvine. Her work centers on libidinal economy.

**Sheila Kunkle** teaches cultural theory at Vermont College. She is the author of numerous articles on Lacan, film, and cultural politics.

**Juliet Flower MacCannell** is the author of *Figuring Lacan* (University of Nebraska Press, 1986), *The Regime of the Brother* (Routledge, 1991), and *The Hysteric's Guide to the Future Female Subject* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000). She is Professor Emerita of Comparative Literature at University of California, Irvine, and has taught at Stanford and University of California, Berkeley. Recent articles concern Las Vegas, jouissance, artist Sophie Calle, Rousseau, Alain Badiou, and urban anxiety.

**Todd McGowan** teaches critical theory and film in the English Department at the University of Vermont. He is the author of *The Feminine "No!": Psychoanalysis and the New Canon* (SUNY Press, 2001) and *The End of Dissatisfaction?: Jacques Lacan and the Emerging Society of Enjoyment* (SUNY Press, 2004).

**Hilary Neroni** is an assistant professor of film in the English Department at the University of Vermont. She is the author of a book on the

image of the violent woman in contemporary American cinema, forthcoming from SUNY Press.

**Mark Pizzato** is an associate professor of theater at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte. He teaches playwriting/screenwriting, film, theater history, and play analysis. He is a published playwright, and his teleplays have won New York Film Festival and Minnesota Community Television awards. He is the author of *Edges of Loss: From Modern Drama to Postmodern Theory* (University of Michigan Press, 1998), and he has recently completed a second book, entitled *Theatres of Human Sacrifice: From Ancient Ritual to Screen Violence*, forthcoming from SUNY Press.

**Frances L. Restuccia** is a professor of modernism and contemporary theory in the English department at Boston College. She is the author of two books: *James Joyce and the Law of the Father* (Yale University Press, 1989) and *Melancholics in Love: Representing Women's Depression and Domestic Abuse* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000). She is currently finishing a book entitled *Amorous Acts: Lacanian Ethics in Modernism, Film, and Queer Theory*. She is also the Contemporary Theory series editor at Other Press and co-chair of the "Psychoanalytic Practices" seminar at The Humanities Center at Harvard.

**Renata Salecl** is a philosopher and sociologist working as a senior researcher at the Institute of Criminology, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. She is the author of *The Spoils of Freedom* (Routledge, 1994) and *(Per)versions of Love and Hate* (Verso, 1998). Her next book is entitled *On Anxiety*, forthcoming from Routledge.

**Slavoj Žižek** is a senior researcher at the Institute for Social Studies, Ljubljana, Slovenia. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Verso, 1999), *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (Verso, 2000), *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski Between Theory and Post-theory* (BFI, 2001), and *On Belief* (Routledge, 2001).

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# *Preface*

Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle have assembled a unique collection of psychoanalytic essays on contemporary film that enables film theory to take a huge leap. This volume advances and enriches the field of film theory in general as well as Lacanian film theory in particular. Readers will gain a new understanding of the operation of the gaze in film: heretofore located, and tamed, in the Imaginary, the gaze is reconceived by these essays in charged relation to the register of the Real. It is *this* gaze—the gaze in the Real—that has the potential to play a radical role in films daring enough to attempt to include its unsignifiability.

*Lacan and Contemporary Film* takes film, film theory, and Lacanian film theory into the realm of ideology through traumatic film encounters with the Real. The issue of power is central to this text, as is the imbricated issue of powerlessness or jouissance. Fantasy, too, turns out, as this collection informs us, to have a political effect: here we see demonstrations of McGowan's provocative thesis that the very existence of fantasy in film indicates an aporia within ideology, a fissuring that fantasy also can close up. Fantasy

offers an opportunity to encounter the gaze, and as a result—film being the breeding ground of fantasy—this collection reveals ways in which film plays with the spectator's desire. McGowan and Kunkle present the essays in their collection as testimony to film's transformative effects—its ability to catalyze the traversal of a fundamental fantasy—its fertility in generating new desire(s), and its capacity to challenge ideology. For the politically minded reader and/or the reader seeking some insight into his/her psyche, McGowan and Kunkle's text offers a great deal of food for thought—on the conscious and unconscious levels.

It is a great pleasure to include this potpourri of film essays in our Contemporary Theory series. It reinforces the commitment of the series to the most up-to-date thinking in the field of contemporary theory. We seek smart, new theoretical work of all stripes, with important practical consequences, manuscripts that transgress the limits of theory as it now stands and expose the necessary overlap of theory with the world in which we live, day by day. This series welcomes all theory being done currently in feminist, queer, and other political contexts, psychoanalysis, film studies, or aesthetics. *Lacan and Contemporary Film* itself is meant for a wide audience: art historians and art critics; film aficionados, critics, and theorists; psychoanalytic theorists and psychoanalysts; and students of contemporary theory in general.

Frances L. Restuccia
Series Editor

# *Introduction: Lacanian Psychoanalysis in Film Theory*

TODD McGOWAN and SHEILA KUNKLE

Lacan has long been a name associated with the analysis of film. During the 1960s and 1970s—what was perhaps the most fecund epoch of theorizing about film—he served as an inspiration for nearly every significant contribution to the development of film theory. Before Lacan became a popular figure in the rest of the humanities, he was firmly ensconced in a foundational role within film studies. Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier*, Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and Jean-Louis Baudry's "Basic Effects of the Cinematographic Apparatus," just to name a few of the major works of the time, all took Lacanian psychoanalysis as their starting point for apprehending the cinematic experience theoretically. Lacan—or at least a certain understanding of Lacan—provided film studies with a way of making sense of film's appeal. Specifically, Lacan's insights into the process of identification allowed film theorists to see why film was so effective in involving spectators in its narrative. As a result,

Lacanian psychoanalysis became *the* approach within film studies.

In fact, Lacan dominated film studies so thoroughly that Lacanian psychoanalysis dictated the very terms of debate within the field. Theoretical innovations, when they occurred, arose as counterpoints to a Lacanian understanding. We can see this when, for instance, Gaylyn Studlar couched her unique insight into the role of masochism in filmic pleasure as an alternative to the prevailing Lacanian conception of identification. Even more significantly, however, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll introduced their *Post-Theory* collection—an attempt to turn film studies in the direction of cognitive theory and empiricism—as a riposte to Lacanian film theory, what they labeled "*the* Theory." Despite their open hostility to what they believed were the nefarious effects of Lacan on film studies, Bordwell and Carroll nonetheless conceived their collection as a corrective to these effects, thereby attesting to Lacan's hegemony. Thus, throughout the last twenty-five years, both partisans and opponents have demonstrated Lacan's importance.

This importance has not been without its negative ramifications, however. Though Lacanian theory set the terms of debate within film studies, it did so very narrowly, and this narrowness eventually resulted in its evanescence. At an increasing rate over the last ten years, Lacanian psychoanalysis has disappeared from film studies, the discipline that it once thoroughly controlled.[1] This collection of essays emerges in the midst of this evanescence, out of an effort to rethink the relationship between Lacanian psychoanalysis and film theory, especially in light of recent devel-

1. Today, there are some Lacanian theorists working on the study of film—such as, for instance, many of the contributors to this volume—but most of them exist either on the margins of or outside the field of film studies proper. Within film studies, not only has Lacanian psychoanalytic theory disappeared, but theory as such has given way almost completely to historicism and empirical research. The discipline has become, as David Bordwell and Noël Carroll prophesied in 1996, post-theoretical.

opments within film itself. That is, the contributors seek to conceive a Lacanian analysis of film that is adequate to the exigencies of contemporary film, and this requires a break from the previous incarnation of Lacanian film theory. They are attempting to bring Lacan to the study of film with an entirely new emphasis. However, the understanding of Lacanian theory developed in the essays that follow can best be understood by distinguishing it from the Lacanian film theory it aims to replace. In other words, in order to see the direction in which these essays will take Lacanian theory, we must pay attention to the limitations that have plagued Lacanian film theory in the past. The narrowness of Lacanian film theory manifested itself chiefly in two ways: in the way that film theory appropriated Lacanian psychoanalysis and in the way that film theory approached cinematic experience. Let us look at each of these in detail.

## AN IMAGINARY LACAN

Film theory's understanding of Lacan was largely mistaken. It had the effect of placing an undue importance on the role of the mirror stage—and the category of the imaginary—in Lacanian theory. This misplaced emphasis began with Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, who likened the cinematic experience to that of Lacan's mirror stage, in which the subject believes itself to attain a mastery of the self and of the visual field that it does not actually have (see Lacan 2002). When it came to Lacan, film theory dealt with the registers of the imaginary (the order of the image) and the symbolic (the order of language), focusing on the interrelations of these registers to the near-total exclusion of the Real (that which "resists symbolization absolutely"). According to a theorist such as Metz, the reception of film was an imaginary experience that had the effect of blinding the subject to its interpellation into the symbolic order. By providing subjects with an illusory mastery over the visual field, cinema disguises their subjection to the

signifier.[2] As Joan Copjec (1994) points out in *Read My Desire*, this formulation followed directly from Louis Althusser's attempt to allow Lacan to inform a Marxist understanding of the process of ideological interpellation.

According to this view, film became an ideological weapon and Hollywood a factory for the interpellation of subjects into ideology. As Jean-Louis Baudry puts it,

> [cinema] constitutes the subject by the illusory delimitation of a central location—whether this be that of a God or of any other substitute. It is an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect, necessary to the dominant ideology: creating a fantasmatization of the subject, it collaborates with a marked efficacy in the maintenance of idealism. [1985, p. 540]

Here, the filmic experience creates a sense of subjectivity in the spectator at the point that this spectator is most thoroughly deprived of subjectivity. Film's imaginary reinforcement of an illusory subjectivity fulfills a crucial role in the working of ideology, which has as its fundamental aim the production of a sense of subjectivity. As Louis Althusser formulates it in his landmark essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, by the functioning of the category of the subject" (1971, p. 173, Althusser's emphasis). For Althusser, subjectivity itself is the deception, the product of ideology, and the proper response of the film theorist became that of exposing the ideological work that films perform, showing how the cinema employs the process of identification in order to further the subjection of subjects.

This theoretical approach was not entirely unfaithful to Lacan, especially to his thought from the 1950s. At this relatively

2. According to Metz, "Insofar as it abolishes all traces of the subject of the enunciation, the traditional film succeeds in giving the spectator the impression that he is himself that subject, but in a state of emptiness and absence, of pure visual capacity" (1982, p. 96).

early point in his career, Lacan saw the symbolic order as a machine that functioned perfectly, that determined the existence of subjects so thoroughly that they were often unable even to recognize this. Such an understanding manifested itself in Lacan's well-known reading of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter." According to this reading, each of the participants in the story acts on the basis of her/his position relative to the signifier. Lacan argues that the story deploys a basic structure in two different scenes. In the first, the queen, who has received an incriminating letter that she doesn't want her husband to see, hides it in plain sight; the king, who is situated in the position of the big Other, fails to see it; and the minister, who occupies the position of the psychoanalyst grasping the functioning of the signifier, steals it from under the queen's nose. The purloined letter here occupies the position of the signifier, and its role is determinative. Each character plays a part that results from the structure in which she/he is enmeshed—and her/his position in it—rather than from an act of will. The power of the symbolic structure becomes apparent when the same dynamic repeats itself later in the story with different characters in each of the positions. As Lacan shows in his discussion, the signifier runs its course and determines the paths that subjects take. The most that subjects can do—and this is what psychoanalysis assists them in doing—is to free themselves of their imaginary sense of freedom and become aware of their subjection to the signifier.[3] But despite this possibility of gaining awareness of the signifier's power, the path of the signifier remains determinative. According to this conception, the signifier determines the subject, and—what is even more

3. Lacan's early conception of the psychoanalytic cure—implicit in the example of "The Purloined Letter"—is very much modeled on the thought of Spinoza and the transition from Book IV (human bondage) to Book V (human freedom) in the *Ethics*. For Spinoza, one attains freedom at the moment one recognizes one's lack of freedom and thereby actively adopts necessity rather than passively enduring it.

significant—it does so without a hitch. In this sense, perhaps film theory's appropriation of Lacan is understandable: film theory took up Lacan's early belief in the determinative and smooth functioning of the signifier and conceived of disruptions in this functioning as only the illusions of the imaginary. Film here had a precise role: to provide the imaginary lure necessary for subjects to accept their subjection. Hence, film became the handmaiden of ideology, its imaginary supplement. Were this collection taking this view of Lacan and film, we would be dealing with a whole other set of films. The films under consideration here (despite, in some cases, their origins in Hollywood) aim at breaking from this traditional role of Hollywood film in capitalist society.

What was missing in this Lacanian film theory was any sense of the power of film to disrupt ideology and to challenge—or even expose—the process of interpellation. This was the result of its too narrow understanding of Lacan, an understanding that elided the role of the Real in Lacan's thought. According to this way of understanding Lacan, the signifier's authority is absolute, and its functioning is flawless. But this fails to see the signifier's dependence on failure—the role that failure plays in the *effective* functioning of the signifier. Failure is necessary because the signifier must open up a space through which the subject can enter: a perfectly functioning system allows for no new entrants, no new subjects. As a consequence, if the symbolic order is determinative in the path that it lays down for the subject, it doesn't lay down this path smoothly but in a way that is fraught with peril. That is to say, the symbolic order continually comes up against a barrier that disrupts its smooth functioning—a barrier that Lacan calls the Real. This barrier is not external to the symbolic structure: the Lacanian Real is not a thing in itself existing beyond the realm of the signifier. Instead, the Real marks the point at which the symbolic order derails itself, the point where a gap occurs within that order. The symbolic order cannot exist without gaps at which its control breaks down. These gaps not only hinder the working of the symbolic order, they are also essential to its working. Without the hindrance, the mechanism

cannot function. In order to function properly, the symbolic order must function improperly.

Ironically, as film theory was developing a line of Lacanian thought that focused on the imaginary and the symbolic in the late 1960s and 1970s, Lacan himself turned toward the Real as the central category of experience. He sketched the different forms of the *objet a* as little bits of the Real, as those partial objects—the gaze, the voice, the breast, the feces, and the phallus—that cause desire and are circled by the drives. The Real is not simply what "resists symbolization absolutely," but also the pivotal category in the process of subjectivization. As such, Lacan's turn toward the Real informs each of the essays that make up this collection, even though they do not always explicitly address it. This emphasis on Lacan's turn toward the Real means that the focus in this collection is not on the ideological dimension of the filmic experience—the central concern of much previous Lacanian film theory. Though all of the essayists recognize that ideology is at work in every film and that most Hollywood films serve a primarily ideological function, the focus here is on the disruptive and radical power of film—even Hollywood film. Thus, *Lacan and Contemporary Film* aims to be the first book of its kind—a book geared not toward unpacking the ideological dimension of the filmic experience but toward discovering there a challenge to ideology.

This change of focus follows from a radically different conception of the relationship between ideology and the subject. Rather than conceiving the subject as fantasmatic, as the apogee of the ideological process, the following analyses view the subject as a point at which ideology fails. In this regard, they take as their point of departure Slavoj Žižek's contention in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* that "the subject is the void, the hole in the Other" (1989, p. 196). The subject is thus not a positive entity, but the gap that constitutively and necessarily haunts the Other. It is the stumbling block of sense—that which cannot be made meaningful within the structure of the symbolic order. The subject emerges only because the symbolic order remains incomplete and split. If the symbolic

order were whole and if it functioned smoothly, the very question of subjectivity would never manifest itself. As a result, ideology cannot be said to produce the subject; instead, ideology functions to conceal the void that is the subject, to fill in this void with a fantasmatic content.

The conception of ideology that informs the essays in this collection actually lies implicitly in earlier Lacanian film theory. If ideology works so well and if the subject is nothing but the effect of ideology (as this film theory supposes), then we might ask why ideology requires the filmic experience to function as its imaginary supplement. An ideology that functioned smoothly would produce obedient subjects that didn't require the reinforcement that the cinema provides. That is to say, ideology's very dependence on its imaginary supplement—the fact that ideology needs help, that there are films at all, even if their sole purpose lies in buttressing ideology—indicates the presence of a Real gap within ideology. *That* a film exists is thus even more important than *what* a film does. Despite the role that Hollywood films play in what Baudry calls "creating a fantasmatization of the subject," such films also indicate a gap within ideology, a void within the symbolic order that requires the imaginary in order to obscure it. In this way, traditional Lacanian film theory's conception of the cinematic experience—as the site of an imaginary supplement to ideological interpellation—hints at the vastly different conception evident in the essays that follow.

For the writers in this collection, the ideological dimension of film lies in its ability to offer a fantasy scenario that delivers us from a traumatic Real. At the same time, film's radicality stems from its ability to involve us in an encounter with this Real. Thus, the ideological and the radical dimensions of film overlap; both involve a relationship to the traumatic Real. And often the ideological fantasy can serve as the vehicle through which the Real manifests itself. One of the salient features of recent cinema is its proclivity for staging an encounter with the traumatic Real, and this encounter is the implicit—and often explicit—subject of most of the essays in this collection. Despite all the complaints about the malaise of

contemporary cinema, this cinema displays a devotion to the Real unprecedented in the history of film. But if contemporary cinema is committed to the encounter with the Real, this encounter also depends on the way spectators experience these films, which takes us to the question of spectatorship and reception.

## INTERNAL SPECTATORS

In addition to challenging the reduction of the filmic experience to the category of the imaginary, this collection also breaks from previous Lacanian film theory in its focus on filmic texts rather than on the experience of spectatorship. The equation of the cinematic experience with the mirror stage was a decisive moment in the history of film theory, as it focused all theoretical energy on the reception of film at the expense of the filmic text itself. As a result, the vicissitudes of spectator identification became film theory's central concern. This concern reached its apotheosis in Laura Mulvey's landmark essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which established the very ground for questions of spectatorship within film studies for nearly twenty years. Film theory began to ask questions about how the process of identification worked, and this ushered in innumerable complications for Lacanian theory. The relatively straightforward ideas of identification found in Metz, Baudry, and Mulvey became problematized in the thought of critics such as Mary Anne Doane, Kaja Silverman, and Carol Clover, just to name a few. Film theorists came to see that identification functioned with wide variation from spectator to spectator, a variation that eventually caused the Lacanian theory of identification to lose its coherence and collapse.

This is not to say that the question of spectatorship itself has disappeared from the radar screen in film studies. Despite the turn away from Lacanian film theory within film studies over the past ten years, this theory's central concern—the question of spectatorship—has emerged again as the discipline's preeminent topic. Recent film theory—reception studies, cognitive approaches,

phenomenology, and so forth—has challenged the idea that one can examine the filmic text outside of the conditions of its reception. Theorists such as Janet Staiger and Noël Carroll, despite their marked theoretical differences, agree on this fundamental premise and thus focus on how spectators experience the filmic text in the viewing process itself. For these theorists, one must study the conditions in which spectators receive a filmic text, whether these conditions are cultural, cognitive, physiological, or phenomenological. From this perspective, it makes no sense to speak of the text itself outside of these conditions of reception. The text thus attains the status of the Kantian thing in itself, where it is firmly ensconced in contemporary film studies. One brackets the filmic text as an unknowable thing beyond experience and proceeds to investigate the conditions of its reception as a phenomenon. As a result of this widespread procedure, the thing in itself haunts film studies today just as it did the Kantian critical system.

The essays in this collection depart from these notions of spectatorship. Each essay takes as its focus filmic texts rather than the process of their reception. But this does not mean that these essays disdain the process of reception and questions of spectatorship. In other words, they do not naively pursue the filmic text as something existing outside of our apprehension of it. To put it in Hegelian terms, they continue to view the filmic text as a text for us; however, they refuse to separate what the text is for us—our reception of it (i.e., the question of spectatorship)—from what the text is in itself. The text in itself is already the text for us. Hence, rather than focus directly on the spectator's reception of the film, the essays here focus on the way that this reception inheres within the filmic text itself. That is to say, the underlying assumption is that one cannot separate the filmic text from its reception as if they existed independently of each other. Every film anticipates and calls for the mode of its reception.[4] This reception does not occur "after" the text's construction but is present in that very construction.

4. Walter Davis (1994) has given this idea its most thorough and compelling articulation, though in terms of drama rather than film.

Thus, when the following essays analyze contemporary films, they are implicitly discussing the reception that greets them. But they are discussing this reception as itself an aspect of the filmic text, not a process external to it (which is precisely what contemporary film studies as a discipline tends to do). To talk about the text *is* to talk about its reception.

Conceiving reception as intrinsic to the filmic text itself removes the analysis of film from the realm of the social sciences and returns it to the domain of interpretation—its proper province. As long as Lacanian film theory devoted its energies to the question of spectatorship as an occurrence external to the filmic text, critics of Lacan such as Stephen Prince had some justification in claiming that "film theorists . . . have constructed spectators who exist in theory; they have taken almost no look at real viewers. We are now in the unenviable position of having constructed theories of spectatorship from which spectators are missing" (1996, p. 83). According to Prince and the empiricists who dominate film studies today, Lacanian film theory always dealt with an abstraction when it discussed spectatorship—not actual flesh-and-blood spectators. It is impossible, of course, to respond to this objection. The moment that one turns to the empirical and begins to account for individual differences among spectators, one relinquishes altogether the territory of the theoretical as such.[5]

Lacanian film theory allowed itself to fall victim to this critique by virtue of the nature of its focus on spectatorship. At the moment when film theory looks at spectatorship as a process divorced from the filmic text itself, it ceases to be interpretive, and—by extension—it ceases to be theoretical. In this sense, it leaves the ground that Lacan claims for psychoanalysis. For Lacan, as for Freud, psychoanalysis is a project of interpretation that has nothing to do with empirical research. Just as clinical psychoanalytic interpretation must focus on the psychic text, filmic psychoanalytic interpretation must focus

5. Prince is not disingenuous on this issue. He plainly calls for studies of spectatorship that are purely empirical and involve no theoretical speculation whatsoever.

on the filmic text (and find the spectator inherent within—rather than external to—this text). Through such a return to interpretation, Lacanian film theory can regain the proper turf of psychoanalysis, where it can recognize the power of jouissance in the cinema and uncover the lure of the spectral object there in order to become cognizant of the Real.

To turn from the question of spectatorship to that of interpretation would appear to open the door to relativism and empirical difference even further. After all, nothing seems as tentative as the act of interpretation: no matter how much regard we might have for it, no interpretation of a text ever strikes us as definitive. And yet, Lacan claims precisely this for psychoanalytic interpretation. It *is* definitive because it proceeds not in the direction of meaning but in the direction of non-meaning. As he says in *Seminar XI*,

> it is false to say, as has been said, that interpretation is open to all meanings under the pretext that it is a question only of the connection of a signifier to a signifier, and consequently of an uncontrollable connection. Interpretation is not open to any meaning. This would be to concede to those who rise up against the character of uncertainty in analytic interpretation that, in effect, all interpretations are possible, which is patently absurd. The fact that I have said that the effect of interpretation is to isolate in the subject a kernel . . . of *non-sense*, does not mean that interpretation is in itself nonsense. [1978, pp. 249–250, Lacan's emphasis]

As is clear from Lacan's account, psychoanalytic interpretation involves isolating the traumatic Real through its effects within the text. It pays attention to the movements of the text and finds the point of the traumatic Real around which these movements circulate. As a consequence, interpretation discovers meaning through the isolation and identification of the point at which meaning fails.

Because it aims at uncovering meaning through isolating the point at which meaning fails, this kind of psychoanalytic interpre-

tation avoids the pitfalls that plagued earlier Lacanian film theory's investigation of spectatorship. Unlike spectatorship theory, it is able to stake interpretive claims without equivocation and endless qualification. Each of the essays in this collection pursues its own version of this interpretive mode. The encounter with the kernel of the Real that psychoanalytic interpretation calls for is particularly appropriate when we approach contemporary cinema. As will become apparent, much film today has explicitly taken up an engagement with the Real and its effects. The result is a series of films that enact trauma, jouissance, fantasy, and desire in unprecedented ways. In the encounter with these films, theory's role is to assist us in unlocking their radicality—an assistance that mere empirical analysis or studies of spectators cannot provide. It is the contention of the authors in this collection that Lacanian psychoanalysis represents the mode of interpretation most adequate to this task.

## LACAN AND CONTEMPORARY FILM

In the essay that opens the collection, Paul Eisenstein examines directly the increasing emergence of the Real resulting from the breakdown of symbolic structures. In his analysis of Darren Aronofsky's π (1998), Eisenstein illustrates how Max Cohen (Sean Gullette), a brilliant mathematician, confronts the absence of a master signifier in today's society and bears the possible consequence of a full-fledged psychotic break. In this confrontation, Max suffers from a lack of symbolic mediation that would provide respite from the Other in its Real dimension. Max constantly encounters this Real as he moves closer to acquiring perfect certainty through his mathematical calculations. Even though Max seems to have rediscovered a new form of symbolic mediation at the end of the film, π nonetheless attests to the increasing presence of the Real in the experience of contemporary subjects.

Considering the emergence of interactive and virtual technologies today, Renata Salecl reveals how the venue of cyberspace allows

the subject to devise ways to avoid the anxiety caused by the uncertainties of the Other's desire. The writing of electronic love letters to one's self, Salecl maintains, is a peculiar phenomenon that provides ready-made answers from the Other. It allows the subject to configure a satisfactory yet self-referential way to avoid the nonexistence (the Real) of the Other's desire. However, as Salecl also indicates, without uncertainty love is not possible, for it is the enigma of love that sustains the deciphering of desire and the flourishing of passion. Through an analysis of love letters in the melodrama *Love Letters* (1945), Pedro Almodóvar's film *Law of Desire* (1987), and the play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Salecl traces the difficulties of love that lead to current attempts to avoid its fundamental uncertainty.

Juliet Flower MacCannell's essay also explores a world in which uncertainty is disappearing, as she compares the original version of *Cape Fear* (1962) with Martin Scorsese's remake (1991) in order to illustrate our closer proximity to the Real today. In Scorsese's version, we no longer experience the Real through the mediation of the symbolic Law—with its attendant uncertainty and indirection—but as a kind of "brute force," or "pure drive," in the words of MacCannell, that has consequences directly on the flesh, on the physical body. Her analysis reveals how we have moved from a regime of the Father and symbolic Law to a society where the "symbolic Law has left only its faintest and most ironic traces." As a result, we now confront a new version of paternal authority, an obscene, primal father who commands jouissance rather than a symbolic Father who prohibits it.

According to Mark Pizzato, Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) depicts the emergence of this new paternal figure and the irruptions of the Real that he engenders. Pizzato claims that Kubrick's film changes the coordinates of the cinematic experience, thereby revealing the cinema itself as a version of the primal father demanding the spectator's jouissance. Thus, it locates the spectator in the position of protagonist Bill Harford (Tom Cruise); like all contemporary subjects, the spectator and Harford must navigate a world teeming with perverse displays of jouissance.

The perverse displays of jouissance that populate our cultural landscape are of a piece with the emergence of global capitalism. In her analysis of *Family Man* (2000) and *Memento* (2000), Anna Kornbluh explores the effects of the ideology of global capitalism on today's subject. *Family Man*, in particular, demonstrates how the seemingly infinite possibilities that global capitalism offers suffocate the subject, desexualizing the subject's desire. However, in *Memento*, Kornbluh sees the articulation of an alternative to the global capitalist world of excess. The film makes clear that "the wealth of choices offered by late capitalism are a lure destined to obfuscate the dimension of the *true* choice, the 'leap of faith' by means of which we accept the ideological coordinates of the existing system." Despite the power of contemporary global capitalism and its ideology, the subject still has the power to return to this initial leap and venture something new, and this becomes the greatest threat to the status quo, providing the first step toward the creation of a new universe for the subject.

The creation of a new universe through the act of traversing the fantasy is the explicit subject of Todd McGowan's discussion of the science fiction thriller *Dark City* (1998). McGowan illustrates how the seemingly isolated act of a subject traversing his fantasy completely transforms an entire world. In a world controlled and manipulated by a group of aliens known as the Strangers, a lone figure, John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell), breaks through the hold that fantasy has over him and thus changes the entire ideological edifice upon which the Strangers' society exists. Here, we see that traversing the fantasy is not just a private response to our contemporary situation but an actual political act capable of changing the coordinates that govern our experience.

Slavoj Žižek makes clear precisely what is at stake in the act of traversing the fantasy through his analysis of *Fight Club* (1999). According to Žižek, the Other's hold over the subject depends on fantasy: subjects remain invested in the Other because they hold dear some precious fantasmatic kernel in themselves that the Other authorizes. The subject's valuing of this kernel amounts to a renunciation of freedom. Thus, in the act of striking at oneself (as

the participants in the various fight clubs do), one breaks the Other's hold and obtains freedom. *Fight Club* introduces the notion of beating one's self in order to obtain a freedom; this freedom is purchased, however, at the price of blood, broken bones, and the complete sacrifice of symbolic identity—that is to say, at the price of an encounter with the trauma of the Real.

Perhaps the most important site at which the Real manifests itself today is in the sexual relationship, or, more properly, the failure of this relationship. The Real emerges as the sexual relationship breaks down, as its fundamental stumbling block, and also through the feminine jouissance that the failure of the sexual relationship makes possible. Frances Restuccia's analysis of Bess (Emily Watson) in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) reveals how Lacan's "third order" impossible love, beyond the limits of the Law, finds the female hysteric confronting the Real. The salient feature of the hysteric is her insistence on the sexual relationship even in the face of its impossibility. According to Restuccia, "her fantasy persists and can be in a sense forced to materialize." As a result, the hysteric, as we see in the case of Bess, pushes the failure of the sexual relationship to its limits, forcing the Law to reveal its impotence, and seeking, in the end, a relationship with God through an ultimate sacrifice.

Discussing Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke* (1999), Hilary Neroni also discusses the power of the feminine subject and the danger of her jouissance. In *Holy Smoke*, the power of a distinctly feminine jouissance, depicted in the ecstatic experience of Ruth (Kate Winslet), marks a point of disruption in the symbolic structure, a moment that forces all other characters to reevaluate and reconfigure their fundamental fantasies, desires, gender roles, and orientations to the Law. According to Neroni, the great achievement of Campion's film is not simply its depiction of Ruth's jouissance but its thorough exploration of the ramifications of this jouissance—and Ruth's insistence on it—for the Other. In this way, *Holy Smoke* shows us that feminine jouissance occupies an inherently political ground that we might inhabit.

## FORMALIZATION AND THE REAL

For Lacan, the path to the Real in psychoanalysis necessarily involves the project of formalization. As he puts it in *Seminar XX*, "The real can only be inscribed on the basis of an impasse of formalization. That is why I thought I could provide a model of it using mathematical formalization, inasmuch as it is the most advanced elaboration we have by which to produce signifierness" (1998, p. 93). Through formalization, Lacan claims, we can map the way that the Real impacts upon and disrupts the functioning of the symbolic. Lacan's turn to the matheme provides a set of formulas for sexuation and fantasy, and his late topologies of strings, rings, and knots suggest ways to represent the subject's relation to the Real. Such formalizations erect structures that reveal the inherent limit of formalization itself. Even as he increasingly turned to formalization, Lacan's focus remained on the limits of this process, on certain experiences of a jouissance of the Other, beyond meaning and language. He continually configured the subject's coordinates at the juncture of the symbolic, the imaginary, and the Real, exploring the beyond of the Other, the traumatic Real itself.

In this regard, our approach to film analysis in this collection offers a way for us to combine the formalizations of Lacanian thought, its very structure and terms, and the experience of the ecstatic, often horrific Real that manifests itself in so many contemporary films. Filmic analysis offers, we believe, a privileged site for the elaboration of the contours of the Real because it combines the symbolic structure of analysis with the traumatic Real often unleashed in the cinema. Thus, through the formalizations of Lacan, we can fathom the lack in meaning and the beyond of the signifier that so many contemporary films have in their sights. The analyses that follow work to discern the traces of the ineffable Real without, at the same time, abandoning the project of systematic analysis itself. As all our film analyses reveal, the contemporary subject must deal with a changing psychic reality. More and more, the subject

must confront the Real of its existence without the mediation of a clear symbolic structure. It is precisely at such a moment that we must take stock of the relation between the subject and the Real. The authors in this collection explore just this relation by analyzing how the subject is faring as it moves closer into the coordinates of the Real through the confrontation and subjectivization of its most dreaded fears, the ecstatic experiences of a feminine jouissance, the descent into psychosis, or the traversing of the fantasy into new coordinates for the subject. Far from seeing filmmaking today, then, as purely the province of (at best) mindless escapism or (at worst) ideological manipulation, the essays that follow see film as a privileged site at which we constitute new desires, experiment with unhinging our fundamental fantasies, and imagine ways to resist the power of ideology.

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# 1

# *Visions and Numbers: Aronofsky's π and the Primordial Signifier*

PAUL EISENSTEIN

Perhaps the revolutionary proposition of Lacanian psychoanalysis involves the notion that analytic discovery does not involve a finding of meaning. In lieu of such a finding, the end of Lacanian psychoanalysis entails instead an *encounter* with something that signifies whose most salient feature is its stupidity—that is, its inability to be inscribed in any meaningful way within the order of understanding and knowledge. Lacan calls this thing that signifies a pure or primordial signifier, and he insists that both the efficacy of psychoanalytic treatment and our very conceptualization of the structure of subjectivity is bound up ineluctably with it. Admittedly, Lacan's advocacy of the primordial signifier cuts against the contemporary belief that freedom, pleasure, and radical politics depend on our liberation from such signifiers (and in many cases from subjectivity itself). For Lacan, however, there is no getting beyond the primordial signifier, not when we recognize its structural necessity. Indeed, as Lacan sees it, the primordial signifier has simply a function—a formal gesture to carry out whose importance

lies not in the content of its signification, but rather in the fact that it is signifying. In a parable of sorts meant to illustrate this essential dimension of the signifier, Lacan says:

> I'm at sea, the captain of a small ship. I see things moving about in the night, in a way that gives me to think that there may be a sign there. How shall I react? If I'm not yet a human being, I shall react with all sorts of displays, as they say—modeled, motor, and emotional. I satisfy all the descriptions of psychologists, I understand something. . . . If on the other hand I am a human being, I write in my log book—*At such and such a time, at such a degree of latitude and longitude, we noticed this and that.* [1993, p. 188, Lacan's emphasis]

This trivialization of just what a primordial signifier ends up moving a human being to write down—the message it brings reduced to a mere "this and that"—is part and parcel of a strategy to drain it of any and all meaning (thus meeting directly the charge that psychoanalysis belongs to the logocentric, and therefore dubious, history of reason and rationality).[1] Indeed, what distinguishes the primordial signifier for Lacan is precisely the extent to which it calls attention to its autoreferential, purely formal aspect. As Lacan puts it,

> What distinguishes the signifier is here. I make a note of the sign as such. It's the acknowledgement of a receipt [*l'accusé de réception*] that is essential to communication insofar as it is not

1. This very notion of a pure signifier—of a signifier immune to perpetual partition—continues to mark the impasse between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. In his most recent critique of the latter, Derrida again brings to bear on psychoanalysis "the question of divisibility," a question that renders impossible any putative claim to have unearthed a primordial signifier and thus reached a terminus of analysis: "Because dissociability is always possible (and with it the undoing of the social bond, dissociability), because one must always and can always analyze, divide, differentiate further, because the philolytic principle of analysis is invincible, one cannot assemble anything whatsoever in its indivisibility" (1998, p. 33).

> significant, but signifying. If you don't articulate this distinction clearly, you will keep falling back upon meanings that can only mask from you the original mainspring of the signifier insofar as it carries out its true function. [1993, p. 188]

Here, Lacan points to the radical and unsettling dimension of the primordial signifier: we know we are in its presence when we are forced simply to take note of a sign *as such*, when we choose to acknowledge receipt of a "message" that signifies without being significant.[2]

As Lacan's parable suggests, it is a primordial instance of signifying that enables a properly human world to emerge. This is why it makes sense to speak of the primordial signifier's function as essentially "creationist." As the first and purely formal instance of communication, it calls a human individual out of the animal world of automatic reactions and institutes a world in which objects and the natural environment achieve consistency and speech becomes possible. The psychoanalytic account of human and cultural development lies here—in the notion that a sign *acknowledged but not understood* is the only way to account for the passage from nature

2. The quintessential exemplar of such a message is, for Lacan, the statue of a smiling angel. According to Lacan, we need only visit a few cathedrals in order to see that an angel's smile is stupid—a sign that "it is up to its ears in the supreme signifier" (1998, p. 20). For this reason, angels underscore the function of the signifier. As Lacan puts it, "It's not that I believe in angels . . . it's just that I don't believe they bear the slightest message and it is in that respect that they are truly signifying" (pp. 20–21). This same point can be seen in Adorno's championing of modernist art over and against social realism, his belief in the radical potential inherent in the autonomous work of art. Does not Adorno's aesthetic theory rest likewise on situating the work of art at the level at which its form alone isolates the primordial, alienating signifier of late capitalist social relations—that is, on the essential abandonment of a work of art dedicated to the communication of a message or lesson? As Adorno puts it, "The very idea, so fashionable nowadays, of 'stating something' is irrelevant to art" (1977, p. 168). Nor is "the office of art to spotlight alternatives" (p. 180). Instead, in Adorno's memorable phrase, the work of art resists the course of the world (i.e., the extant social order) *by its form alone*, rejecting in the process what Adorno called "the dogmatic sclerosis of content" (p. 154).

to culture, from the animal world of instinct and appetite to the human world of language and desire. This sign acknowledged but not understood (i.e., the signifier) literally *effects* the subject—that is, it brings a subject about out of nothing. We are, as Lacan suggests, "not yet a human being" when every signifier is understood to bear a meaningful and intelligible message.[3] Indeed, when every desire is automatically and directly materialized, we cannot yet even be said to reside in the order of desire proper. But when one signifier exempts itself from the order of meaning, when the message it brings eludes understanding, when we are forced to take note of its strictly formal function, then a fundamental division between self and Other can be said to have taken place, and a social order emerges in which we begin to speak and signify. Lacan's central thesis regarding the advent of subjectivity and the social order returns again and again to the key role played by the primordial signifier in setting the subject adrift in a world of alterity, a world in which others appear to want something of us. When Lacan claims that "the signifier is what brings jouissance to a halt" (1998, p. 24), this is what he means: functioning as a sign that strikes the subject as a kind of address, the signifier interrupts the apparent (but in fact engulfing) idyll of presymbolic enjoyment, inaugurating a subject of desire and crystallizing an ontologically consistent social reality capable of being apprehended by human beings.

The "this and that" whose observation is enabled by the primordial signifier, then, is perhaps the most sublime of all trivia; as

3. One of the most interesting features of Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* lies in its depiction of this idea. When David, the young "mecha" child (a mechanical being with artificial intelligence), is first introduced into a human family, he appears as an inhuman presence, evincing a dispassionate coldness and inability to interact smoothly with his new mother and father. This coldness stems directly from his belief that every signifier bears a meaningful message, which is why the "directions" for adopting him involve confronting him with the stupid dimension of the signifier. His mother effects his humanization by reading a series of seven stupid, nonsensical signifiers. This encounter with the senseless signifier thrusts David into the realm of humanity, and he immediately hugs his "mother" and expresses his love for her.

the exception that interrupts the circuit of demand and satisfaction, it ends up serving as the basis upon which human beings find their bearings in the world. We have here, of course, landed on the centrality of the Oedipus complex (i.e., the phallus *qua* primordial signifier) in the development and socialization of human sexuality. By introducing the signifier, the Oedipus complex enables the supersession of polymorphous sexuality by a hierarchization of the drives, thus conditioning a relationship between human beings and their sexed bodies that takes into account the larger norms and rules governing the display or practice of sexuality (including, most crucially, the prohibition of incest). But the pure or primordial signifier emerges just as crucially in other forms—for instance, in the most primitive of cave paintings and mythological stories and in the highest natural laws unearthed by modern physics. Because both furnish signifiers without the slightest literal meaning, they provide the basic rules and laws that set us upright in the world, lending an organization and a structure and an order to human reality—or, as Lacan's encomium for Einstein's "little equations" would have it, "thanks to him we hold the world in the palm of our hand" (1993, p. 184).

Lacan's claims regarding the stupidity of the signifier bear directly on what is arguably the dominant symptom of our historical moment—the psychotic structure (and threat of full-blown psychosis) currently animating a number of contemporary scientific and mathematical efforts to "discover" that the primordial signifiers that stitch up a given universe of meaning *do* in fact carry a message of intelligible and meaningful content. Underwritten by the belief that these signifiers *were never bereft* of literal meaning in the first place, these efforts work at "incorporating the exception"—at certifying once and for all the tumescence of the signifier. Examples of these efforts are numerous. There is, for example, the so-called Bible Code, in which events as disparate as Newton's discovery of gravity, the Stock Market's 1929 collapse, and Yitzhak Rabin's assassination are foretold by the God of the Old Testament. There is the Suzy Smith Project at the University of Arizona, in which subjects algorithmically encrypt a short phrase or sentence

that they'll then attempt to communicate to a living person after they die (thus confirming the survival of consciousness in the hereafter). And finally, there is *The Second Coming Project* in Berkeley, California, which aims to locate an "incorrupt cell from one of the many Holy Relics of Jesus' blood and body" for the purpose of fertilizing a human egg with Christ's DNA and then implanting the zygote "into the womb of a young virginal woman (who has volunteered of her own accord), who will then bring the baby Jesus to term in a second Virgin Birth."[4] In all of these quests, we seem to be in the midst of concerted, psychotic attempts to show that our symbolic order has in fact been carrying the traces of its canonized status all along, that its ground is a sacred, extratemporal order of meaningful knowledge that has simply been awaiting the technological progress necessary for its discovery.[5] It is this order of knowledge, then, that stands ready to rebeatify our world and thus reverse the effects of that traumatic cut that marks the institution of the signifier—what Lacan, in the aforementioned parable, refers to as "things moving about in the night that gives me to think that there may be a sign there."

The hidden but crucial mediator of these efforts is the critical, said-to-be "objective" or "ideal" signifying capacities believed to inhere in the means by which science and math register and transmit information. The miracle of these capacities, for their adher-

4. For more on these three phenomena, see, respectively, Drosnin (1997, 2002), Smith (2000), and *The Second Coming Project*.

5. This view finds its clearest expression in Drosnin's 1997 bestseller, *The Bible Code*, in which Drosnin—a skeptic won over to the idea that the Old Testament foretells significant events in human history—claims that we can certify the truth of the Bible Code today only because we have the technological means to do so. As Drosnin puts it, "The Bible is not only a book—it is also a computer program. It was first chiseled in stone and handwritten on a parchment scroll, finally printed as a book, waiting for us to catch up with it by inventing a computer. Now it can be read as it was always intended to be read" (1997, p. 25). We see it also in the discourse of *The Second Coming Project*, which claims that certain key events and lines in the New Testament—e.g., the Last Supper, "In him we have redemption through his blood" (Ephesians 1:7)—have awaited the discovery of cloning for their true meaning to be apprehended.

ents, rests precisely in the presumption that the ultimately meaningful natural and/or theological truths and causes they discover remain uncontaminated by the means used to procure and communicate them. This is not just to repeat the maxim that every observer changes, in however small a way, what he/she observes; it is to say, instead, that structurally speaking, there is necessarily a non-sensical dimension—a point of opacity—in the Thing observed that permits our observation of it in the first place. In other words, something about the Thing is not, and cannot be, entirely obvious. That so many recent scientific and mathematical attempts to break through and discover the very secrets of extratemporal knowledge rely explicitly on code is thus not surprising. As a metalanguage more accurate than our own, codes come to stand as a form of transcendent and meaningful writing *written by* the Other and existing independently of human cognition. That is to say, codes appear as a kind of metalanguage immune to the conditions or limitations that make a discourse possible.[6] Today, DNA is increasingly regarded as a kind of code containing the truth of our being—the very secret of life.[7] And computer codes are routinely

6. These conditions, as I have been saying, involve the extent to which symbolization already entails the flight or cancellation of the real. One categorical imperative of psychoanalysis is thus to insist that no discourse can claim to have intelligibly rendered or captured the real. As Bruce Fink puts it, "Psychoanalysis' claim to fame does not reside in providing an archimedean point *outside of discourse*, but simply in elucidating the structure of discourse itself" (1995a, p. 137).

7. For the genealogy of this phenomenon, see Kay (2000). Kay's (Foucauldian) historicization of the rise of the genomic code—it is, she claims, a "'period piece,' a manifestation of the emergence of the information age" (p. 2)—captures beautifully the extent to which discoveries pertaining to the "elementary unit of life" become enmeshed in biological meaning-making efforts. From Kay's account, it is possible to see a kind of "stupidity" in molecular biology's construal of genes prior to the 1950s. Then, genes were seen simply as proteins bearing biochemical specificities. Prior to the '50s, when the idea of codes or information was invoked, it was almost exclusively as a metaphor, the words themselves appearing in quotation marks. But as molecular biology gets overrun by "the technoscientific imaginaries of the missile age," the discourse of information transforms the notion

credited for uncovering—at long last—meaningful signification in the real: only a computer, for instance, is capable of turning the original Bible into one continuous letter strand (304,805 letters long) in order to map every conceivable sequence of letters, and only a computer is able to encipher phrases into mathematical codes that can later be deciphered to confirm that a given communication received from the dead *is* in fact authentic and not one more instance of the deception that announces the symbolic order's imperfection. Indeed, today, codes appear more and more to solidify the triumph (initiated by Bacon) of the truth claims of science over those of theology—that is, its ability to *explain* transcendence in material terms and thus absorb all metaphysical accounts of causality by referring them to the structural rigor of the scientific method.[8]

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of genes *qua* proteins into the notion of genes *qua* information, language, code, message, and text. The quotation marks disappear and the genomic code becomes itself an ontology, a veritable Book of Life whose unambiguous reading has awaited the material and theoretical tools of molecular biology. The problem with such an unambiguous reading is nothing less than the conceptual ground it clears for eugenics. If Kay's initial aim is to restore the fundamentally metaphorical nature of the genomic code—"The genetic code is not a code; it is, rather, a powerful metaphor for the correlations between nucleic and amino acids" (2000, p. 11)—she does evince the characteristic poststructuralist unease with metaphor *in toto*. Thus her suggestion that those who attempt to use information theory in molecular biology in its intended form—to see, for example, the genomic code as a primordial signifier bearing information that must not be confused with meaning—themselves introduce a totalizing discourse that risks arresting the polysemic nature of any putative "universal" or "absolute" instance of writing. For a similar genealogical critique of the way scientific explanations are the product of a given epistemological culture—that is, the way that explanations *get to count as explanations* only if they meet certain needs—see Keller (2002).

8. Perhaps the paradigmatic instance of this involves recent neuroscientific research that explains religious experience—what Michael Persinger calls "the God Experience"—in terms of the evolution of neural networks, neurotransmitters, and brain chemistry. Relying on the most advanced brain-imaging technology, this research focuses on "brain function" during meditation, prayer, and ritual experiences in order to understand more completely the feeling of having communed with a transcendent Being. For this thesis, see Persinger (1987) and Newberg and D'Aquili (1998). The unstated assumption informing efforts such as these is that no phenomenon can ultimately escape the order of scientific laws.

At one level, the assertion of such codes at least has the advantage of arresting the endless play of substitutions characteristic of a more metonymic, deconstructionist universe; at another, however, they raise the paranoid specter of a language that *coincides with*—instead of sublating—what it illuminates. Far from replacing, canceling, or otherwise barring access to the Other in its lethal, indistinguishable-from-myself, flesh-and-blood dimension, these codes usher us into a seeming paradise of plenitude. But the coherent image of this imaginary paradise is entirely a psychotic fantasy, since it emanates always from a symbolic position and functions as a way of compensating for the lack and inconsistency that is part and parcel of that position. It is here that we can see the extent to which today, by failing to exempt primordial signifiers from our meaning-seeking efforts, we obstruct the signifier's crucial role in the institution of the symbolic order—that is, its overwriting of the imaginary, its calling a halt to jouissance. By failing to permit the exception around which a universe of meaning is constituted—the metaphorical substitute for the ultimately lethal jouissance of the flesh and blood Other (Mother, Nature, God)—we risk losing that critical place for ourselves as subjects to gain a foothold, a place secured only when a primordial signifier comes to name and neutralize the potentially all-engulfing lethal jouissance of the Other. The failure of this "essential metaphor"—the Name-of-the-Father, the natural Law—to take hold ends up then catalyzing a psychotic structure in which there is no lack admitted in the Other, in which the Other telegraphs its intentions not through the dead letter of the Name or formula but directly to the subject in the form of libidinally invested, prelapsarian primordial signifiers.

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As Fink puts it, "Causality in science is absorbed into what we might call structure—cause leading to effect within an ever more exhaustive set of laws. A cause as something that seems not to obey laws, remaining inexplicable from the standpoint of scientific knowledge, has become unthinkable—our general tendency being to think that it will just be a matter of time before science can explain it" (1995b, p. 64).

The diagnostic/conceptual dividing line between neurosis and psychosis lies here: if hysterics encounter a signifier whose meaning remains enigmatic, psychotics never really encounter the signifier proper, since every use of signifiers is believed to bear significant information. Indeed, as Lacan points out, what is most distinctive about the existence of the signifier—the possibility of it being used not to *inform* but to *lure*—is precisely what does not belong to the psychic economy of the psychotic. For the psychotic, every exchange of words is informational. Put another way, psychotics fail to observe the Lacanian distinction between a signifier that signifies without being significant. In short, for the psychotic, every word is significant; no word merely signifies. Psychoanalysis, however, stakes our equilibrium on the non-sensical dimension of the pure signifier. As Lacan puts it, "to extract a natural law is to extract a meaningless formula. The less it signifies anything, the happier we are" (1993, p. 184).[9] As a science, psychoanalysis already has as its target the psychotic structure that underwrites the fundamentally theological fantasy of the natural and social sciences—the notion that the deepest secrets of nature and society will, in the end, be shown to have had a meaningful ground all along.

This fantasy is crystallized in an exemplary way in Darren Aronofsky's $\pi$ (1998), a film that, in taking its viewer on the path from scientific pursuit to full-blown psychosis, ends up as a kind of object lesson in the etiology and symptomatology of psychosis for late capitalist culture at large. The achievement of Aronofsky's

9. For Lacan, the space for interpretation depends on reducing the significance of the signifier. This is why psychotics face no interpretive problems. Refusing to concede the nonsense in signifiers, psychotics always find more and more meaning, and thus never really get to the question of subjectivity. Instead, psychotics remain wedded to the ego. As Marie-Hélène Brousse points out, the nonsense in signifiers is what "allows you to impoverish the ego. Interpretation has to be enigmatic, that is, it has to produce less knowledge. By that, Lacan means, in the analytic setting, knowledge is to be taken as a test for knowledge and not as an application of knowledge" (1996, p. 126).

film, however, does not extend simply to the accuracy of its portrayal of psychosis. This is because $\pi$ ends up—in the encounter it stages between viewer and film involving both a numerical signifier (a 216-digit number believed to contain the key to the thorniest of social and cosmological enigmas) and a visual signifier (the image of its central character at the instant of performing a kind of self-lobotomy)—forcing a confrontation with that which cannot be made to mean. In the visions and numbers around which $\pi$ is structured, in other words, Aronofsky manages to isolate the primordial signifier in its purely formal dimension. Thus at the end of Aronofsky's film, what we have discovered is a kind of imagistic equivalent of the primordial signifier, an antidote of sorts to the psychosis that the film depicts and the antithesis to the lion's share of commercial Hollywood films in which the central images are eventually inscribed within some intelligible and meaningful framework.[10]

The immediate context for Aronofsky's film is no doubt the historic, four-thousand year quest to fix the exact value of the most

10. As representative of this trend, we might consider here M. Night Shyamalan, and the way his films are driven primarily by an inexplicable phenomenon, a nonsensical image or phrase, that ends up being rendered intelligible by film's end. The appeal of *The Sixth Sense* (1999), for example, lies in the basic mystery confronting child psychologist Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis)—a boy (Cole Sear, played by Haley Joel Osment) with the capacity to "see dead people." The full meaning of this phrase is not revealed until we learn by the end that Crowe, himself, is one such dead individual. The narrative of *Signs* (2002) shares a similar logic. Arriving at the scene of a fatal car crash involving his wife, Father Graham Hess (Mel Gibson) is able to hear her final, seemingly nonsensical, words: "Swing away Merrill, swing away." The accident is responsible for Hess giving up both his faith and position in the church. At one point, Hess sees these lines—which refer to the brother-in-law who now lives with him after a failed professional baseball career—as simply the random firings of some nerve endings in his wife's brain. The film's climactic scene, however, in which the Hess family is confronted directly by a menacing alien, grants them a prescient dimension. That scene dismisses the existence of coincidence, of the free-floating signifier that has no anchor in the universe of meaning. In the end, this is what convinces Hess to become "Father Hess" again.

famous of irrational numbers ($\pi$)[11]—a quest whose current manifestation has mandated the building of ever more elaborate computers capable of calculating the ratio of a circle's circumference to its diameter out to billions of digits (the current record is 51 billion). This quest to "square the circle" has almost always been a theological one. What has attracted so many to figuring out the value of $\pi$ has not simply been the complexity of its endless divisibility but rather *why* it should unfold in such a complex manner.[12]

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11. The discovery of irrational numbers—that is, numbers that cannot be identified completely, since they have no patterns that repeat and thus require an infinite number of decimals to be written exactly—constitutes one of the decisive paradigm shifts in mathematics away from algebra and toward geometrical/mathematical analysis. It is their discovery that is responsible for dealing the death blow to the (Pythagorean) notion that "God is number," that the perfection of God rests in the fact that the relationship between magnitudes could be represented with integers and their ratios. Irrational numbers give, as it were, a Kantian turn to the mathematical screw, since they base mathematical analysis not on the perfect truth and logic of rational numbers (i.e., numbers that are either "whole" or that can be written with decimals that eventually become zero or that have a pattern that repeats itself indefinitely), but on the notion of geometrical demonstration and a continuum leading to infinity whose terminus cannot be reached. For an overview of this paradigm shift, see Aczel (2000, pp. 11–24). Kant, himself, credits geometry with ushering in a revolution "much more important than the discovery of the passage around the celebrated Cape": because geometry recognizes a kind of opacity/irrationality in numbers, it ends up dealing not with what numbers and the properties of figures are, in themselves, a priori. Instead, what geometry elucidates is that numbers and the properties of figures are brought out by an act of the subject—that is, "by virtue of what [the mathematician] himself was, according to concepts, thinking into it a priori and exhibiting" (1996, pp. 17–18).

12. For an overview of the history informed by this notion, see Blatner (1997). Blatner notes that no measurement realistically requires even 100 digits of pi—engineers routinely use no more than seven and physicists use no more than fifteen or twenty. For him, the search for pi is "deeply rooted in the human spirit of exploration—of both our minds and our world—and in our irrepressible drive to test our limits" (p. 3). As Blatner sees it, $\pi$ separates the line between the finite and the infinite and thus represents a mystery to be appreciated. Behind this appreciation, however, appears to be a deferral of the (Hegelian) recognition that every pull up in the face of the infinite is in fact the infinite. The computation and writing of the decimals—Blatner's own book contains one million

For Max Cohen (Sean Gullette), the brilliant mathematician at the center of Aronofsky's film, the advances and insights into mathematical knowledge likewise have little to do with utility. As Max asserts in one of the film's initial voice-overs, mathematics is the very language of Nature. Everything around us can be represented and understood through numbers, he claims, and these numbers, if graphed, will reveal the emergence of meaningful patterns. Max's voice-over here culminates with his sitting in a park in New York City's Chinatown, staring at the leaves at the top of a tall tree, with shots from Max's point of view that zoom in on these leaves suggesting a kind of superior, penetrating sight on Max's part. (The reverse shots likewise zoom in on Max's face, suggesting an uncanny intelligence in Nature itself.) As we might expect, this deep-seated belief that nothing in Nature eludes our sense-making capacities has its origins in Max's boyhood, where the institution of the primordial signifier in the form of a fundamental prohibition never took hold. This is made clear in the film's initial voice-over in which Max gives us our lone insight into his childhood: as a boy, he disregarded his mother's prohibition not to stare at the sun, and the experience resulted in the temporary bandaging of his eyes, in recurrent headaches, and in the feeling (as Max puts it) that "something had changed inside me."

Far from functioning as a lesson on the necessity of symbolic interdictions, this experience is described instead in words Icarus might have used (the film will later invoke the Daedalus–Icarus motif)—as a kind of triumphant refusal to accept any effective prohibition. For Max, this refusal amounts to an instance of fortitude that provides direct access to the deepest sources of the Other's (in this case, Nature's) secrets, delivering in the process a moment of

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of the digits—might be a way to evade an encounter with the symbolic icon π, and the fact that it *keeps on signifying*. From the standpoint of physics, the same is true for the crucial element *hydrogen*. As John Rigden suggests in the epilogue to his "biography of hydrogen," the continued existence of science is linked to the fact that "the hydrogen atom still beckons," on the fact that there is something about this "essential element" that remains opaque (2002, p. 255).

pure understanding.[13] Convinced of the existence of patterns everywhere in nature—in disease epidemics, in the wax and wane of caribou population, in sunspot cycles, in the rise and fall of the Nile—Max has now centered his attention on the stock market, believing that it, too, must evince a meaningful pattern capable of being known. Indeed, this is for him, in some sense, the sole significance of the stock market: just like the movement of the leaves of a tree, it is an entity *that* is signifying, and Max is committed to discovering the "intelligence" behind it.[14] For him, the stock market stands not as the exemplary signifier without signified of late

13. This sense of triumph emerges in Max's second voice-over dealing with the disregarded prohibition: "When I was a little kid, my mother told me not to stare into the sun. So once, when I was six, I did. At first, the brightness was overwhelming, but I had seen that before. I kept looking, forcing myself not to blink. And then the brightness began to dissolve. My pupils shrank to pinholes and everything came into focus. And for a moment, I understood."

14. One sign of Max's psychosis here is that he is not at all concerned with symbolic recognition or material advantage. This is patently clear in his rejection of the Wall Street firm Lancet-Percy (i.e., the "petty materialists"), which wants access to Euclid's predictive abilities. On the contrary, Max wants *perfection*—the jouissance of the Other in an unmediated form. Aronofsky extends this insight into psychosis in his second film, *Requiem for a Dream* (2001). At first glance, it might appear that Aronofsky has pursued a different path, since the thing that catalyzes the plot is his protagonists' attempt to secure the recognition of the Big Other: Sara Goldfarb (Ellen Burstyn) wants to appear on television in her red dress and thus regain the recognition she imagines she once enjoyed; her son Harry Goldfarb (Jared Leto) and his girlfriend Marion Silver (Jennifer Connelly) aim to open up a dress shop; and Harry's friend, Tyrone C. Love (Marlon Wayans), is shown more than once speaking to a picture of his dead mother about his pursuit of money and security. But as *Requiem* dramatizes the quest to realize the "dream" of societal validation, it ends up showing that the (horrific) appeal of a pre-symbolic jouissance is too great. This explains the great pull of the addictions that lead to the ruination of the four (captured, in the film's climax, by the way Aronofsky depicts a kind of horribly triumphant orality: Sara has a rubber appliance put into her mouth during her electroshock treatment; Marion has a dollar bill shoved into her mouth while being forced to "perform" at the party; Harry's mouth is covered by an oxygen mask). The end of the film reveals that the other "dream" in the film—centered on Harry and Marion's love for each other (at one point, Harry says to Marion that she is his "dream")—is likewise no match for the lethal jouissance of the Other.

capitalist social relations; on the contrary, he sees it as "a universe of numbers that represents the global economy. Millions of human hands at work . . . billions of minds . . . a vast network screaming with life. An organism. A natural organism." His hypothesis is that deep within the stock market, "there is a pattern as well. Right in front of me. Hiding behind the numbers. Always has been." In the attempt to make plain what has been hidden, Max's life (and entire apartment) is devoted to Euclid—a monstrous, homemade assemblage of monitors, hard drives, modems, and cables that Max has retrieved from an electronic mega dump, that exceeds in power and speed the entire Columbia University computer science department and that is on the verge of being able to predict with 100 percent accuracy the daily vicissitudes of the market. At the onset of the film, Max is "so close" to achieving this accuracy, and he spends his days working to inoculate Euclid against anomalies he chalks up to human error, and checking *The Wall Street Journal* against the data Euclid is able to produce.

At the coffee shop where he compares stock quotes, however, Max makes the acquaintance of Lenny Meyer (Ben Shenkman), an orthodox Jew who, upon learning Max's name, reminds him of his Jewish identity, mentioning Kabbalah and the fact that it is now a "critical moment" in the history of Judaism. Lenny asks Max if he's ever put on tefillin—the small cube-shaped boxes worn on the forehead and arm, containing the four textual sources (from the Bible) for the practice. Two of these sources come from Exodus and concern the duty for each Jew to commemorate God's deliverance of the Jews, to acknowledge a God for whom such deliverance begets certain responsibilities and obligations. The other two come from Deuteronomy and concern Judaism's basic prayer, the *Shema*, which begins by acknowledging the singularity of God ("Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One") and then proceeds to lay out a detailed description of the rewards and punishments that might follow from obeying (or not) His laws. For Lenny, tefillin have "a tremendous amount of power" and putting them on is a "mitzvah for all Jewish men to do"—a good deed that "purif[ies] us and bring[s] us close to God." The tefillin may

"look strange" (at these very words of Lenny's, Aronofsky cuts to a close-up of this object), but the place of the small box in daily Jewish worship is clearly intended to recall the symbolic pact made between God and the Jews—a pact rooted in filial recognition of the paternal Law, as well as the several substitute satisfactions God offers in the form of speech, writing, ritual prayer, and obedience. Conceptually, tefillin introduce both the conditional freedom that constitutes the theme of Exodus and the Jews' deliverance from slavery in Exodus, as well as the injunction to love and follow the entire codified set of good deeds designed to secure the approval of God. The practice of putting on tefillin involves the realization of this conceptual dimension. The knots and straps placed on head and arm involve, as it were, a symbolic performance of *self-binding*, a constraining of one's intellectual and bodily prowess. In this light, it is not hard to see why the very mention and sight of tefillin constitute the threat to Max that they do. As a reminder of a fundamental obligation, it presents to Max the place of the Law where there is no signifier, the edge of a hole, and thus triggers in Max the first of a series of psychotic breaks in which Aronofsky ushers his viewer entirely into the domain of the imaginary, besieging us with a rapidly cut chaos of perceptions, sensations, visual images, and auditory impressions. His thumb twitching, his head invaded by sounds he can't control, Max returns to his apartment where he hallucinates the existence of an "Intruder" pounding on his door, unlocking its several bolts, and finally breaking its chains—at which point he becomes unmoored from the social world altogether, and the film's field of representation is entirely taken over by what Aronofsky has termed "the blinding white void."[15] One of the achievements of $\pi$ lies here, in its depiction of the paradoxical and harrowing nature of the fully fledged psychotic break, in which the

15. Strictly speaking, this is the second such breakdown, since the last frame of the opening credits—not coincidentally, the picture of a whitened sun against a black background—is engulfed by the blinding white void that dissolves eventually into the opening image of the film: an extreme close-up of Max's face, his nose bleeding, his cheek to the floor as he comes to.

subject is completely engulfed by the jouissance of the Other. For Max, God is not yet an entity one must attempt to satisfy—and thereby ward off—by the repeated performance of ritual; on the contrary, He is an entity to be *known*, a source of perfection that can help us understand (and thereby gain mastery over) our world. But as the film clearly demonstrates, the knowledge and perfection he seeks at the same time threaten the very ontological consistency of Max's universe, which explains his injunctions (on the cusp of the break) for the "Intruder" to "leave me alone." Refusing to accede to the act of exchange that marks the very founding of Judaism (and of any symbolic order)—the dividing up and distributing of jouissance—Aronofsky thus depicts Max being made to bear God's return in the real. And what that return entails is not the harmonious symbiosis with the Other that the psychotic imagines.

After regaining consciousness, Max symptomatically interprets his problem as an organic one whose remedy rests with neuroscience and pharmacology.[16] Soon, Euclid accurately predicts a series of stock quotes—in the process spitting out a 216-digit number at the very instant that it crashes—and Aronofsky's film arrives at the primordial signifier whose meaning the psychotic is desperate to literalize.[17] The notion that this signifier bears a literal meaning—that there is something to be seen behind or beneath

16. The list of Max's "failed treatments" (given to us in a voice-over) is a long one: beta-blockers, calcium channel blockers, adrenalin injections, high-dose ibuprofen, steroids, trager metasitics, violent exercise, Cafergot suppositories, caffeine, acupuncture, marijuana, Percodan, Midrin, Tenormin, Sansert, homeopathics. He also consults some sort of medical textbook, hoping to localize that section of the brain that might be responsible for his "headaches." Needless to say, all of these measures treat the problem as organic/physiological.

17. It is interesting to note that when Max takes apart his computer to discover the cause for the crash, he finds the remains of an ant that has left some sort of ooze on the circuit boards, shorting them out. This ooze cannot be silicon, given silicon's melting point of 1414 degrees Celsius (2577 degrees Fahrenheit)—a feature that makes it so suitable for circuit boards. At any rate, this organic discovery of what in fact interfered with his computer's ability to run correctly becomes, in Max's hands, a profound source of inspiration. In this scene, and the one following it, I think we can see Aronofsky playing off the motif at

the number—is only enhanced by Max's discoveries following Euclid's crash: first, that his mentor Sol Robeson's (Mark Margolis) investigations into the number $\pi$ crashed into a 216-digit number as well and second, that Lenny Meyer's group of Hasidic Jews (led by Rav Cohen [Stephen Pearlman]) believes the same number to be the true name of God whose intonation would reverse the Roman destruction of the Second Temple and thus restore the High Priests of Judaism (the *Kohanim*) to their place at the center of that Temple and, ultimately, return the world to the Garden of Eden.[18]

In the case of the latter, we see perhaps most explicitly the extent to which the vivification of God is linked to the meaning believed to reside in the father's *name*. Citing the Talmud, Rav Cohen instructs Max that the entire priesthood, all of the *Kohanim* (the Cohens), were destroyed by the Romans at the destruction of the Second Temple. In this way, their "greatest secret" was destroyed, and along with it, any real ground capable of guaranteeing the integrity of their name. Bereft of the Temple, there is no longer a place for the crucial "single ritual" that the holiest of priests—the "High Cohen"—must perform. According to Rav Cohen, on the Day of Atonement, all of Israel would descend upon Jerusalem to witness this priest's trip into the "earthly residence of God" at the center of the great Temple for the purpose of intoning His true name. If the priest was pure, he would emerge a few moments later and Israel's security and prosperity would be secured for the coming year. In this account of Rav Cohen's, we have here not just an effort to bring Max back within the fold of Judaism—to make him a "Cohen"—but all the ingredients for the formation of a group

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the heart of the story of Archimedes, a figure whom Max's mentor, Sol, actually invokes later in the film. I thank Edward Fowble for helping me to read these scenes of the film.

18. Each letter in the Hebrew alphabet carries a numerical value, a fact that has led some to impute a superior intelligence to this particular language alone. We see this in Lenny's initial attempts to interest Max in the Torah and Kabbalah, showing him, for example, how the numerical value of the Hebrew word for mother (41) added to the numerical value of the Hebrew word for father (3) is equal to the numerical value of the Hebrew word for child (44).

of believers: a group ratifies its privileged place in God's gaze through a ritualized performance rooted in an utterance permitted to only one man in one restricted space. It is perhaps here that the trauma of the destruction of the Temple comes through most clearly, that a direct line from that destruction to our contemporary psychotic universe emerges. Indeed, might we see the circumscribed space of the Temple not merely as a sign of its holiness, but rather as the place that veils the stupidity of the signifier, as the place where a purely formal, performative, "magical" self-legitimizing gesture takes place? The trauma of the destruction of the Temple, then, resides not in the loss of the true name of God, but rather in the Wizard of Oz-like drawing back of the curtain on those founding signifiers that gain their force purely from their own enunciation. Bereft of this space, Rav Cohen cannot position himself as a symbolic father, electing instead to take up the role of *Urvater* and hoping Max is interested in *protection* from God's jouissance. But as Paul Verhaeghe has observed, in the wake of the loss of symbolic paternal authority, "primal fathers are popping up everywhere, on the lookout for their own jouissance" (2000, p. 139). We might see Max, himself, as such a father. This would explain why he will not for an instant entertain the possibility of letting a Cohen "higher" than himself intone the word.

Aronofsky has already prepared us, however, for the fact that an intoning of the word is likely neither to recover a foundation that is beyond or beneath its own utterance, nor to become the meaningful basis for group identity. As Max's psychotic breaks have already made plain, there is only a kind of nothingness—a blinding white void—beyond or beneath the primordial signifier. And though the parties seeking possession of the 216-digit number *imagine* it as a conduit for stability and understanding and an exalted sense of community, Aronofsky's film stages precisely the opposite outcome. This is its central importance as a film; rather than consent to the "lie" that cements a given social order—the belief that Max is, in fact, a "high priest" of sorts, the bearer of knowledge that they want to know nothing about—the parties seeking possession of the number evince themselves the symptoms

of their investment in a psychotic fantasy. Thus, the meaning of the number becomes necessarily an *exclusive* one. Max believes, for instance, that God has chosen to place the number in *his* head alone; Marcy Dawson of the Wall Street firm Lancet-Percy believes that the number is fair game for them because information is ipso facto the language of capital and competition the law of nature; and Rav Cohen claims that Max is merely the "vessel" for a delivery meant for them. It is no accident that all three parties act violently toward each other. Here, Aronofsky gets at the implicit psychotic link between capitalist competition and religious fundamentalism: both seek the secret they imagine would secure their supremacy, even as Marcy Dawson speaks of the "symbiotic relationship" her firm is trying to forge with Max, and Rav Cohen instructs Max in the link between the number and an impending Messianic Age.

This link is made formally explicit both in the ways we are made to see the cube-shaped Ming Mecca chip provided to Max by Lancet-Percy as well as the way it functions as an object in the film. This not-yet-declassified chip is introduced as the key to Euclid's recovery and triumph, and Aronofsky situates and shoots it in such a way as to make its parallel to a tefillin box unmistakable. We first see the Ming Mecca chip in a closeup that mirrors the closeup of the tefillin Lenny first showed Max, and as with the tefillin, the sight of the chip triggers somatic reactions (e.g., thumb twitches) that betoken another invasion into Max's head by an Intruder. The second time we see the chip comes in a medium shot of Max installing it into his mainframe—a shot that frames Max's installation as a kind of monstrous parody of the act of putting the tefillin around his head. Finally, when Max does get the chip installed, it triggers a "meltdown" in which Max's rapid circling of the camera recalls the earlier circling shot to which Aronofsky cuts when Lenny does get Max to put on tefillin and the two of them begin to recite the *Shema*; both evoke an anxious and frenetic encircling of the void.

But the accuracy of $\pi$'s depiction of rampant cultural psychosis is part of a more generalized portrait of the way individuals encounter alterity in a society bereft of the primordial signifier,

where there is nothing to shield us from constantly being enjoyed by others. Almost all of the (little o) others Max encounters in the film are seen as adversarial, invasive, and violent—the bearers of a menacing jouissance. Aronofsky captures this cinematically in several ways. First, he films Max in public spaces in ways that make what Max sees almost always threatening—capable of being looked at in only the quickest of glances. In these spaces, a hideous sense of enjoyment seems to pervade even the most ordinary of gestures (e.g., a man eating a sandwich on a street corner, a man reading the newspaper on the subway, etc.). Even Max's hallucinations betoken an overproximate Other whose exclusive gaze he cannot escape (e.g., the elderly man Max "sees" in the subway who breaks out into song: "Are the stars out tonight?/ I don't know if they're cloudy or bright/ For I only have eyes for you, dear"). It is precisely this Other whose most notable feature is its overproximity that demands a kind of speed and vigilance on Max's part whenever he is in these spaces (e.g., in the subway, in the bodega, walking on the streets of Chinatown, etc.).[19] To capture this speed—and accompanying sense of disorientation—Aronofsky almost always reduces the frame rate in Max's point-of-view shots, thus revealing the increasingly hyperaccelerated world that Max imagines outside the confines of his or Sol's apartment. In addition, he often shoots the reverse tracking shots of Max with a Snorricam, a camera attached to Max's body that results in the frame's tilting with each frenetic step Max takes. A lens of shorter focal length also works to distort both Max's face and the spatial relationships between him and the urban world. Besides reflecting the overproximity of the Other, which is a distinguishing feature of the psychotic universe, these moves work, at times, to "imaginarize" the theater itself—that is, to threaten the implicit contract that governs the theatergoing experience. That

19. The lone exception is the place depicted as outside the circuits of capital and hypertechnologization—Coney Island. There, Aronofsky increases the frame rate to slow down Max's experience of the world, and includes the sight of "King Neptune," a man dressed almost like a clown, trolling the beach with a metal detector, who puts back the seashell he has picked up and admired.

is to say, besides merely depicting the chaos of Max's world, the instability of the camera and inconsistency of the frame risk bringing us face to face with that side of the imaginary that borders on the real. It is this side of the imaginary—and not the one that borders on the symbolic, which reduces the imaginary entirely to the domain of specular images of wholeness—that marks the latter imaginary's point of *failure*, the point at which it breaks into pieces. Thus we might clarify the Lacanian dimension of the counter-ideological thrust of Aronofsky's film by saying that rather than eschew the imaginary altogether as ipso facto ideological, $\pi$ attempts to break its privileged link to the symbolic so as to illuminate the terror of its real, presymbolic status. In other words, the imaginary depicted in $\pi$ is not the version of it with which we are usually presented—that is, a realistic presentation of reality that produces a subject/spectator completely in control of what he/she is seeing.[20] Rather than realistic, coherent mirror images offered up for our easy identification, rather than a fantasized compatibility between jouissance and symbolization, Aronofsky gives us instead images of jouissance that overwhelm the coherence of the film. In so doing, Aronofsky's film helps us to glimpse the imaginary bereft of the fantasy frame that makes it seem so appealing, even if this means bringing Max's world *too close* to us and making the film, in places, difficult to endure.

This sense of suffocating overproximity is rendered cinematically in two other significant ways. The first centers around the

20. This is, as the editors point out in their introduction to this volume, the way Lacanian psychoanalysis has frequently been deployed in film studies—as a way of showing how film's very presentation of reality secures a spectator/subject in the manner of the mirror stage. In this view, film presents imaginary scenarios that are always already fantasized versions of the imaginary—that is to say, versions of the imaginary in which the spectator/subject will precisely *not* experience him-/herself in pieces. Thus Stephen Heath's claim that film works largely by regulating a movement toward disintegration and/or contradiction in the spectator/subject. According to Heath, "Film is the regulation of that movement, the individual as subject held in a shifting and placing of desire, energy, contradiction, in a perpetual retotalization of the imaginary" (1981, p. 53).

recurrent hallucination that precedes Max's psychotic breaks involving the sight of a Hasidic Jew whose mere presence on the other side of the subway line Max takes as a threat, and whose hand is dripping blood, the trail of which leads to Max's own brain. This image suggests both the extent to which castrating agents appear to Max *in the real*, and his investment in a certain neuroscientific fantasy that likewise literalizes the ur-language of the Other, in which a certain segment of Max's brain is taken as the locus of causality for the onslaught of sensory and auditory impressions to which he is subjected. That Max prods, and ends up penetrating, the brain with a fountain pen before being ushered into the blinding white void is perhaps apt, since the jouissance of the Other is precisely what marks out the limits of discourse. The second involves the way Aronofsky signals the impossibility of any sexual relationship for Max. This is clearest in the way that for Max, any woman who evinces the slightest trace of sexual desire betokens the presence of a maternal being who is at the same time obscenely and atavistically sexual. His neighbor Devi's attempts to "mother" Max (she prepares food for him, fixes his hair before he goes out, worries about his welfare, etc.) are part of her obvious desire for him; for Max, however, there is no difference between being desired and being enjoyed, no distance that would allow him to exist before Devi's gaze without being suffocated by her jouissance. Aronofsky twice has Max on the cusp of arriving at the 216-digit number at precisely the same instant that Devi and her boyfriend, Farouk, are engaged in sex. The acoustic dimension of these sexual encounters sends Max into a virtual panic in which the camera rapidly circles him.[21]

21. Aronofsky has intentionally muffled Devi's sounds here, which only heightens the sense that he has restaged a primal scene of sorts. After several listens—and thanks to the sound quality of DVD technology—it is possible finally to discern the sense of Devi's utterances amidst her ecstatic moans: "Do you want to suck on Mama's nipple? / Oh, those tears are so hard./ Mama's going to make everything all right."

That a closeup of Max's finger on the "Return" button of his computer—poised to trigger the computer's revealing of the 216-digit number—generally accompanies the onset of the all-engulfing sounds of enjoyment signals the extent to which the primordial signifier might function for Max. Rather than allowing it to provide some *respite* from enjoyment, Max, as we have already seen, insists on trying to discover why the number enjoys in the way that it does. An articulation of the perils of this attempt to render the signifier back up into the order of understandable causality is left both to Euclid and to Sol. Euclid's own demise contains a message Max can't heed. Becoming aware of its own structure, Euclid must emit a kind of protoplasmic "little piece of the real," the gooey life-substance of an ant that is made to stand in for Euclid's own unsymbolizable origins. This is precisely Sol's lesson to Max. In the face of the psychotic's certainty regarding the meaningful intelligence of the Other's jouissance—Max's belief that "there is an answer in that number"—Sol keeps insisting that the truth of our universe is that there is no meaningful pattern prior to the institution of a symbolic network of meanings in which a universe appears. For Sol, the only pattern is the self-referential one we impose on it, which is why he refuses to allow the number to signify anything, contending variously that the number is a "dead-end," a "door in front of a cliff," a "bug"—all astute ways of characterizing the function of the paternal metaphor in the formation of the symbolic order. Here, Sol is closest to the psychoanalytic recognition that the signifier *does exist* in nature and that it enables us to gain our bearings on the world, but *what* it signifies is entirely another matter. Playing Daedalus to his "renegade pupil" Icarus, Sol tries to reassert a prohibition, warning Max of the dangers of numerology and urging him to leave the digit "unknown."

The precise function of this advice is left ambiguous in Aronofsky's film, since there is evidence that Sol's death—from a second stroke—follows on the heels of a failure to heed his own advice. At the death scene, Max finds the number written out in Sol's handwriting on a sheet of paper, and this may just signal the extent to which Sol's voiced prohibition functioned covertly as a

way of keeping alive whatever meaning the 216-digit number might bear. In any case, Aronofsky finally leaves it to Max to grasp the stupidity of the number and thus to *realize* the impossible object at the heart of the psychotic structure. Up until Sol's death, Max has been committed to "seeing the number," claiming that the number itself is nothing, that it is what's "between the numbers" that is important. Back in his apartment after learning of his mentor's death, Max begins to intone the number (the true name of God) and is cast again into the blinding white void. This time, however, his own image appears in the void, and there is a sense that he has begun to *hear the other speaking within himself* as the bearer of the primordial signifier. This leads directly to the film's final two images—the first of Max, with a drill in his hand on the verge of committing a kind of self-lobotomy; the second of Max, in the park enjoying the *factum brutum* of Nature, no longer positioning himself as the bearer of a question to which he must have the answer. At first glance, the first of these images in which we see the drill penetrate Max's skull, splattering the frame with blood before cutting to black, would seem to invite a reading of $\pi$ in keeping with the prevailing neuroscientific control of psychiatry. On this reading, Max's cure appears to be simple: it is not enough that he burns the number, since it remains in his head. Thus, what's called for is an identification and localization of the area of the brain responsible for the ideational content associated with the number, the excision of which lets him achieve a degree of equilibrium. But that this could actually work as a self-administered procedure strains credulity. Also, since Max appears in the final scene with a black ski hat covering his head, the status of his scalp/brain is left purposely veiled.

Perhaps the surest sign that things are far more complicated than the materialist-realist explanation is the question Aronofsky has admitted is the one he is most frequently asked: How was the self-lobotomy sequence filmed? In the light of this question, we might say here that this image ends up functioning as the film's *own* primordial signifier—a vision homologous with the number at the heart of the film and likewise incapable of being made mean-

ingful. That Aronofsky has confessed that this was the image around which he structured the film—that "writing movies is like reverse paranoia"—only furthers the sense that $\pi$ leads us to the recognition of the purely signifying function of primordial signifiers.[22] Rather than make this image signify something meaningful, Aronofsky appears to grant it a purely structural function. As such, the image functions to "call a halt to jouissance" and, at the same time, to remain a site of non-knowledge that is our bulwark against a fully fledged psychotic universe. The sequence that presents us with the image of Max Cohen with a drill at his skull, then, consists of a physical gesture whose stupidity depends on Max's (and our) subjectivization. In the scene that follows, this formal instance of signification has itself become the content. The scene begins with an extreme closeup of the leaves on the tree of the city park in which Max is sitting, followed by a reverse medium shot of Max staring at the tree. Max is then approached by Jenna (the little girl who lives in a neighboring apartment) to calculate in his head the sum of two hundred and fifty-five multiplied by one hundred and eighty-three. For a moment, Max tries to perform the calculation, then stops and begins smiling, allowing the little girl to do it on her calculator. This decision in favor of non-knowledge is captured cinematically as well in the frames with which the film closes—reverse zoom point-of-view shots that complete the arc established in the film's opening in which Max gains some much-needed *distance* from Nature. Shot at the normal frame rate, Max gazes at leaves blowing in the wind in a way that no longer regards them as the bearer of a hidden and/or sinister pattern or meaning.

The final import of $\pi$ here would seem to be that we, too, in the attempt to counter rampant psychosis, must cast our lot as well

22. In his earliest diary entry related to $\pi$, Aronofsky writes of the lone script of his that would be suitable for a low-budget film: "The working title is 'Chip in the Head.' Along with the title I have a single image of Sean Gullette, my actor friend from college, standing in front of the mirror, his head shaved bald, digging into his skull with an X-Acto blade for an implant he thinks is in there" (1998, pp. 3–4).

with non-knowledge, with something encountered and perceived for which we cannot find a meaningful antecedent. This exemplar of non-knowledge functions to arrest the chain of signification, but it is something of which we cannot make total sense. Has Max really lobotomized himself by film's end? What does the hat covering his head really conceal? Is he merely stupid, or has he subjectivized the stupidity of the primordial signifier at the heart of the film in which he appears? My own contention is that in these scenes, we are presented not with the void behind or beneath language, but precisely with the signifier as such. In his seminar on ethics, Lacan claims that "the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word" and that the word in whose guise it presents itself is "what remains silent; it is precisely that in response to which no words are spoken" (1992, p. 55). So, perhaps we need say nothing about the end of Aronofsky's film except to say that we can say nothing more. Perhaps the finale of the film enacts itself a kind of antidote for the psychosis that it has dramatized—an antidote appearing imagistically as the functional equivalent of the Word for which, today, we must struggle in order to call a halt to jouissance.

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# 2

# *The Anxiety of Love Letters*

RENATA SALECL

On the Internet, one can find numerous sites where people can obtain advice on how to write a love letter. One site, for example, gives the following instructions:

> Clear your desk and your mind of distractions.
> Place a picture of the one you love in front of you.
> Put on your favorite music.
> Take out your best stationery and pen.
> On another sheet of paper, make two lists: a) his/her unique qualities; b) your hopes for the future together.
> Personalize the salutation. "Dear ———," or "To my darling ———," are both fine.
> In the body of the letter, begin by telling him/her what you think makes the individual so special. List at least three qualities, ideally emotional, physical, and spiritual ones.
> In the following paragraph, share your hopes and dreams for the future you can have together.
> Personalize the closing. "I will love you always," "Loving you forever," "My heart is yours," are all good possibilities.

> Don't forget to sign!
> Spray the letter with a light fragrance.
> Address, seal, and stamp the letter.
> Wait a day before you send it; you may change your mind.
> Drop it in the mail, and look forward to the response ("How to Write" 1999–2002).

On other advice sites, people writing love letters can buy all the necessary equipment (stationery, special stamps, pens, etc.) that will help them to complete the task. And there are lots of additional tips on how to write a successful love letter, like "Don't mention anyone else but yourself and the addressee in the letter" and "Make sure you only send a love letter to someone who will appreciate it." For those who still find writing love letters a far too complicated or time-consuming task, special Internet sites offer to compose the love letter for them. A lover can thus give a cyber-Cyrano some basic information about his beloved, and Cyrano will compose and even send a love letter (or even a breakup letter) for the lover.

But the most interesting part about the Internet craze with love letters is the fact that lots of people send various e-greetings and love letters to themselves and not to a distant lover. (One wonders if they also send breakup letters to themselves.) This may seem surprising; however, with love letters, it is always a question of who is actually their addressee. In one of her shows, the artist Sophie Calle exhibited a love letter that her former lover wrote to another woman. But Sophie Calle crossed out the name of that other woman and instead wrote her own name. As part of her art project, she thus simply wrote a love letter to herself. This follows Jacques Lacan's notion that a subject who writes love letters actually does not address the beloved but writes letters to none other than himself. No matter how much a lover tries to capture the essence of his beloved in the letter, he is primarily addressing himself, that is, he is dealing with his own desires and fantasies, his own narcissism—all that constitutes his in-love feeling.

What about the person who writes love letters for someone else? In literature and in movies this theme has been frequently

presented in the form of more or less tragic love triangles, since the one who offers his writing help to a friend often himself falls in love with the person to whom the letters are addressed. Why does a person offer his writing services to someone else? And why does the very act of writing often trigger love feelings in the writer?

In looking at how a subject falls in love by writing love letters for another subject we can discern a clear difference among hysterics, obsessionals, and perverts. While they all have in common that they love in the other what the other does not have—what Lacanian psychoanalysis calls object small *a*—they nonetheless relate differently to this object. I will exemplify the difference in love letters sent by hysterics, obsessionals, and perverts by looking at three cases: the '40s melodrama *Love Letters* (William Dieterle), the famous play *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Edmond Rostand), and the more contemporary film *Law of Desire* (Pedro Almodóvar).

## *LOVE LETTERS*, OR WHAT DOES A HYSTERIC WANT?

*Love Letters* nicely exemplifies the fact that the subject does not need to actually encounter the other person in order to fall in love. It is enough that the subject creates a fantasy scenario around the sublime object that he or she perceives to be in possession of the other. In this film, we have a soldier, Allen, who writes love letters, which his friend, Roger, sends to Victoria. Through the process of writing letters and reading Victoria's responses, Allen falls deeply in love with Victoria. After the war, when Allen learns that Roger has died, he decides to find Victoria. By chance, Allen comes across a beautiful woman named Singleton who has lost all memory of the past and who is supposedly holding a terrible secret. Allen discovers that Singleton is actually Victoria and that she has been accused of murdering Roger. Victoria has been deeply unhappy because her husband did not resemble the character from the love letters with whom she fell in love. One evening, when Victoria is again reading the old love letters, Roger throws the letters into the fire in anger and tells Victoria that he is not their author. In the

next scene, we see Roger lying dead on the floor and Victoria in total shock next to him. After this event, Victoria has been charged with murder, but she has at the same time lost all memory of the past. (Later, however, we learn that the true murderer was a loving old aunt who tried to free Victoria from her husband.) At the end of the film, Victoria recovers her memory and realizes that she has been in love with Allen all the time, since he was the actual author of the love letters.

Allen falling in love with Victoria by writing love letters for Roger demonstrates that the subject often finds an object desirable when it is desired by someone else. The collaboration between Allen and Roger thus helps both of them stay in love with this mysterious woman whom Allen once names a "pin-up girl of the spirit." Allen develops an initial interest in Victoria because of Roger's attraction to her, and Roger finds Victoria even more interesting when he becomes an intermediary for the love letters. When Victoria responds passionately to the letters, Roger becomes very much enchanted by being an object of such profound love. In this film it is thus the love triangle that actually incites the protagonists' passions.

Here we have a case of hysteria, as a hysteric is constantly concerned with questions about desire. The subject thus first becomes attracted to what he thinks is the object of the desire of the Other, and, second, the subject guesses what kind of an object he is for the Other. Since the subject can never get a satisfying answer to the question about the desire of the Other, the subject interprets and finds an answer in a fantasy that he creates.

Both Allen and Victoria fall in love with the help of a fantasy that they form around the object *a*. While Roger is first a kind of postman who helps Allen and Victoria keep their fantasies alive, later, when he marries Victoria, he starts to function as an intrusive intermediary who shatters these fantasies. It is significant that Victoria develops amnesia when she learns that the love letters she received were a fraud and that she has not been such an object of desire for her husband as she believed. At this point, Victoria's fantasy collapses and amnesia helps her to avoid facing the truth about

her desire and her husband's desire. After Roger is killed, Victoria becomes a "different" woman. If Victoria appeared like an innocent girl, Singleton looks like a mysterious beauty who holds a sublime secret. And when Allen falls in love with Singleton, he is attracted precisely by this secret. Thus, even before Allen learns that Singleton is actually Victoria, he is fascinated by that which is in Singleton more than herself—another name for this secret is, of course, object *a*.

Returning to the problem of hysteria, it could be said that the greatest hysteric in this story is actually Victoria. Both Allen and Roger fall in love with Victoria because they are fascinated by the desire of the Other; however, Victoria is the one who is always questioning what kind of an object she is in the desire of the Other. Her conflict with Roger is precipitated by the fact that she does not recognize herself in his desire as she has recognized herself in the love letters. It is crucial that she suffers amnesia only until she realizes that Allen is the true author of the letters. In this context we can read Victoria's loss of memory as some kind of hysteric symptom in which she finds a temporary solution for the traumas related to her love life.

## *CYRANO DE BERGERAC*, OR OBSESSIONAL DESIRE

In contrast to the hysteric's questioning of the desire of the other, we can find in the famous story of Cyrano de Bergerac a case of obsessional neurosis, as the subject here tries to avoid encountering the desire of the other. The main character of the play, Cyrano, is secretly in love with the beautiful young Roxane. Believing, because of his large nose, he is too ugly to ever win Roxane, the eloquent Cyrano helps Christian, a tongue-tied soldier, to woo her with love letters. After many years, Cyrano starts to tell Roxane the truth. But when Christian is killed in battle, Cyrano feels compelled to keep his secret. Years later, Roxane is living in a convent, still faithful to her husband, Christian, when

she is visited by her mortally wounded friend, Cyrano. It is then that Roxane realizes that Cyrano was the beloved author of the love letters. His secret revealed, Cyrano dies as he has lived, heroically and fearlessly.

Cyrano is a typical example of an obsessional neurotic for whom the object of desire is too overwhelming, and thus he actually tries to keep this object at bay. Writing love letters for someone else in this case helps the subject to keep distance from the object. The obsessional is afraid that by coming too close to the object of his desire, the object will devour him and make him vanish. At the end of the play, when Cyrano comes close to Roxane, he tragically dies. Once there is no barrier between Cyrano and his lover, Cyrano cannot continue being in love and live happily ever after. For Cyrano, writing love letters for someone else and thus preventing an actual encounter with the object of his desire was the necessary prerequisite for keeping his love alive.

Cyrano is an especially interesting figure because we have here a particular problem with the phallus. The whole play is centered on the fact that Cyrano has a huge nose that appears as some kind of a phallic obstacle to his love life. When Cyrano admits to his friend that he is in love with Roxane, he himself points out that he cannot expect that his love will ever be realized because his nose makes him unattractive. However, when Cyrano has a verbal exchange with a boy who seems to mock him, he makes a big fuss out of protecting the grandeur of his nose. When Cyrano asks, "Why do you stare so at my nose?," he gets no answer from the boy, but then Cyrano goes on and on with questions like "What is there strange? . . . Is't soft and dangling, like a trunk? . . . Is it crook'd, like an owl's beak? . . . Do you see a wart upon the tip? . . . Or a fly, that takes the air there? What is there to stare at? . . . What do you see?" The boy does not answer these questions and only remarks, "But I was careful not to look—knew better." To which Cyrano responds, "And why not look at it, an if you please? . . . Oh! It disgusts you! . . . Its hue unwholesome seems to you? . . . Or its shape? . . . perchance you think it large?" The boy

staggeringly responds, "No, small, quite small—minute!" Then Cyrano becomes even angrier:

> Minute! What now? Accuse me of a thing ridiculous! Small—my nose? . . . 'Tis enormous! Old Flathead, empty-headed meddler, know that I am proud possessing such appendice. 'Tis well known, a big nose is indicative of a soul affable, and kind, and courteous, liberal, brave, just like myself, and such as you can never dare to dream yourself, rascal contemptible! For that witless face that my hand soon will come to cuff—is all as empty . . . of pride, of aspiration, of feeling, poetry—of godlike spark of all that appertains to my big nose.

Although Cyrano feels impeded by his nose, at the same time he regards it as an organ that gives him enormous power; the nose does not seem to be an obstacle, but rather an asset. It seems as if the large nose that distorted Cyrano's face produced his language skills. Cyrano was thus able to acquire a symbolic power instead of counting on the power of a beautiful body. In this context, it is as if Cyrano replaces a phallus-like physical organ (which is an obstacle) with a symbolic phallus—his language skills. However, it is crucial that in his attempt to seduce Roxane, Cyrano needs an intermediary—Christian.

When Christian first meets Cyrano, he makes fun of Cyrano's nose, but Cyrano is patient with this offense because he knows that Roxane is attracted to Christian. When Cyrano tells him this news, Christian feels extremely happy, but then Cyrano ruins his enthusiasm by saying that Roxane expects a love letter. Christian then says, "I have a certain military wit, but, before women, can but hold my tongue. Their eyes! True, when I pass, their eyes are kind." Cyrano then guesses, "And, when you stay, their hearts, methinks, are kinder?" But Christian responds, "No! for I am one of those men—tongue-tied, I know it—who can never tell their love." To which Cyrano confesses, "And I, meseems, had Nature been more kind, more careful, when she fashioned me, had been one of those men who well could speak their love!" Christian is unhappy that

he has no eloquence, but Cyrano offers him a deal: "I lend [you eloquence], if you lend me your victor-charms; blended, we make a hero of romance!"

Why is it that it requires two men together to make an ideal love partner for a woman? In his unpublished seminar on anxiety, Lacan points out that a man takes a woman as a vase in which there is supposed to be a hidden object, while he also behaves as if a phallus of another man is also hidden in the vase. This can be explained by situations such as a man falling in love with a woman who has previously been the lover of some other man whom the first man admires, or when a woman has a father with whom a man identifies. Lacan points out that the object *a* fills the vase after the subject has undergone castration. But it is essential that the object comes from somewhere else—it is constructed only via desire of the Other. If Allen in *Love Letters* falls in love with Victoria at first because she is Roger's girlfriend, in *Cyrano de Bergerac* it is crucial that Cyrano incites Christian to pursue Roxane, but then does all the work for him. Both Allen and Cyrano thus function as a kind of father figure or even a phallic figure who secures the love relationships that form between his object of desire and another man.

For the understanding of such complications in the subject's love relationships, it is crucial to focus on the lower part of Lacan's famous formulas of sexuation, where one finds on the male side a split subject and the phallus. There is no direct link between the phallus and the split subject; the subject relates only to object *a* on the female side of the formulas. And on the female side, one finds a barred Woman, who has a relation to the phallus on the side of man and to a barred Other, while she has no relation to object *a*, which is on her side of the formulas.

The major problem for the male and the female subject is that they do not relate to that which their partner relates to in them. The phallus that one finds on the side of the man is nothing a man can be happy about. Although a woman relates precisely to this phallus, the man is not at all in control of it. Thus a man constantly tries to take on his symbolic function, since he knows that the symbolic function is what the woman sees in him. However, he neces-

sarily fails in this attempt, which causes his anxiety and inhibition. As Lacan points out, "The fact that the phallus is not found where it is expected, where it is required, namely on the plane of genital mediation, is what explains that anxiety is the truth of sexuality. . . . The phallus, where it is expected as sexual, never appears except as lack, and this is its link with anxiety" (1962–1963, session of June 5, 1963). For men, the way they desire (which is crucial also for the relation that they have with the object *a* on the side of their partner) is conditioned by the fact that castration marked them by a lack, which also means that their phallic function has been negated. As a result of this negation, men are constantly anxious that they might not be able to perform, that their organ might deceive them at the time they will need it most, that others might find them powerless, and so forth. Lacan points out that it is because of this anxiety that men created the myth of Eve being formed out of Adam's rib. This myth allows a man to think that only a rib was taken out of him, and that he is essentially not missing anything, that there is no lost object and therefore the woman is just an object made from the man. Although this myth tries to assure men of their wholeness, it nonetheless does not alleviate their anxiety. This anxiety often erupts when a man encounters a woman who becomes an object of his desire.

For Lacan it is vital that a man gives up as lost the hope of finding in his partner his own lack ($-\varphi$), that is, his fundamental castration. If this happens, everything works out well for a man. He enters into the oedipal comedy, thinking that it is Daddy who took the phallus from him, that he is castrated because of the law. This comedy helps a man in his relationships; otherwise, he takes all guilt onto himself and thinks that he is "the sinner beyond all measure" (Lacan 1962–1963, session of March 26, 1963).

What about a woman's problem with castration? A woman is also a split subject and is thus concerned with finding the object she does not have; she is also caught in the mechanism of desire. However, for Lacan the fundamental dissatisfaction involved in the structure of desire for a woman is precastrational: a woman "knows that in the Oedipus complex what is involved is not to be stronger,

more desirable than mother, but to have the object" (Lacan 1962–1963, session of March 26, 1963). Thus, for a woman the object *a* is constituted in her relationship with the mother. Lacan also claims that if a woman becomes interested in castration (-φ) it is insofar as she enters men's problems, which means that castration is a secondary thing for a woman. As a result: "For a woman it is initially what she doesn't have as such which is going to become the object of her desire, while at the beginning, for the man it is what he is not, it is where he fails" (1962–1963, session of March 26, 1963). A woman is concerned that she does not possess the object that a man sees in her. Thus she constantly wonders what is in her more than herself, and because of this uncertainty, she endlessly questions the desire of the Other.

In short, a man is traumatized by not being able to assume his symbolic role and a woman by not possessing the object of the Other's desire. This tells us why some men are so concerned about keeping their well-organized life intact and dread encountering the woman who incites their desire. Clinging to self-imposed rules gives a man at least temporary assurance that the symbolic order is whole and that it might have endowed him with phallic power. But coming close to the object of desire opens the possibility that this fantasy will collapse and the man will then be stripped naked, exposed in his essential impotence and powerlessness.

Going back to Cyrano de Bergerac, we can say that he fears being exposed in this nakedness and impotence. At the beginning of the play, Cyrano explains to a friend that he loves the fairest lady in the world, "Most brilliant—most refined—most golden-haired! . . . She is a danger mortal, all unsuspicious—full of charms unconscious, like a sweet perfumed rose—a snare of nature, within whose petals Cupid lurks in ambush!" However, Cyrano then goes on to say that he cannot get close to this girl ("this danger mortal") because of his nose. When he sees a knight with a lady on his arm, he fantasizes that he might be able to do the same, but then: "Thought soars to ecstasy . . . O sudden fall!—The shadow of my profile on the wall!" The friend then encourages him by saying that ladies actually love his wit and that from the way Roxane observed

his duel with great concern, she must love him in her heart. But Cyrano answers, "That she mocks my face? That is the one thing on this earth I fear!" In the context of the previous explanation about men's anxieties, Cyrano's fear of having his face mocked or being laughed at because of his nose can easily be explained as an anxiety about having his phallic power exposed in its impotence. And at the same time, we can also say that his fear is precisely not to lose his nose, his last protection from the devouring object.

If men often try to solve their love troubles by extensively clinging to obsessional rituals and self-imposed rules that are supposed to prevent them from being overconsumed by the object of desire, women's dilemma about what kind of an object they are for the man might result in their giving up on love and immersing themselves in a melancholic indifference. One often finds gestures of resignation in women who realize that they were not loved in the ways they had hoped to be or when they acknowledge that they ceased to be the object around which a man's love-fantasy was formed. In *Love Letters*, Victoria finds a temporary solution to her love dilemmas in her amnesia, which is a form of retreat from her old world. And in *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Roxane's seclusion in the nunnery can also be understood as some kind of resignation that allows her to cling to her old love fantasies.

It is important that in both films, women, without knowing it, find a particular enjoyment in redoubling their partners. If one of the lovers in both films is a young, beautiful hunk who cannot master his language well, the other is a fatherlike figure who is well versed in words. Does the woman always need a father on top of a lover? And are fathers actually, in a hidden way, writing love letters for the lovers? If we go back to Lacan's image of the vase in which a phallus has to be hidden so that a man might see the object *a* in the vase, we can speculate that the myth of Cyrano might very well be as much women's fantasy as it is men's. While men deal with their love anxieties so that they become writers for other men, women deal with their anxieties by always having more men in store, and especially by having some father figure in the picture.

## *LAW OF DESIRE*, OR THE PERVERT'S TRAP

If *Love Letters* and *Cyrano de Bergerac* both deal with the idea that the subject needs an intermediary in order to fall in love and stay in love, *Law of Desire* takes another turn. Here we have Pablo, a gay filmmaker, who is very much in love with Juan, while young Antonio is in love with Pablo. Pablo has a sister, Tina, who changed her sex from a man to a woman. Pablo writes love letters to Juan, but Juan's responses are noncommittal. Frustrated, Pablo types up a letter to himself and sends it to Juan with instructions to sign it and send it back. When the letter arrives, Pablo is highly satisfied. But when Antonio reads this letter, he becomes extremely jealous, seeking out Juan and killing him. While Pablo becomes devastated and temporarily loses his memory after a car accident and becomes the suspected killer of Juan, Antonio continues to be obsessed with Pablo. In trying to figure out everything that goes on in Pablo's life, Antonio even seduces Tina, not knowing that she is actually a man. At the end of the film, when police surround the apartment in which Antonio is hiding, Antonio and Pablo passionately make love one last time before Antonio shoots himself.

In this complex plot, we have many problems with love and desire. However, let us focus on Pablo's love letters. Pablo knows what kind of an object he wants to be for the Other, which is why he simply composes a love letter he wants to receive from his lover. When the signed letter arrives back, Pablo reads with great joy that Juan cannot wait to see him and is curious about what is going on in Pablo's life. Pablo does not question what the Other desires or what kind of an object he is for the Other. This is why he does not fall under the category of hysteria or obsessional neurosis. Pablo is certain of what brings him enjoyment, locating him much closer to perversion than neurosis. Neurotic subjects and perverts try to supplement the Other in different ways. While the neurotic constantly has questions in regard to desire, the pervert has an answer—he has found satisfaction and has no doubt about what he wants or what the Other wants. However, while the neurotic con-

stantly complains about the prohibitions he perceives as coming from the Other, the pervert struggles to bring law into being and thus to make the Other exist. Pablo's sending the letter to Juan can be read as such a demand to make the Other exist. For Pablo it is crucial that Juan signs the letter and returns it back in the form of a demand coming from the Other.

If one might find traits of perversion in Pablo's writing love letters to himself, we find in Antonio's obsession with Pablo a case of psychosis. Antonio's passion for Pablo has been referred to as passion without intermediaries; that is, some kind of an immediate relation to the desired object (Smith 1994). At the beginning of the film, after seeing Pablo's film that depicts homosexual eroticism, Antonio masturbates in the cinema lavatory and repeats the phrase, "Fuck me, fuck me," which has been uttered in the film. When he meets Pablo and they make love for the first time, Antonio positions himself as the character in the film who demands to be penetrated by his partner. With this sex scene, Antonio looks like he is repeating the scene he just saw in the movie; however, it is important to know that from the time Antonio first saw Pablo's film, the latter became an ultimate object of desire for him. There seems to be no boundary beyond which Antonio will not go to possess this object. When an obstacle emerges in the form of Pablo's former lover, Juan, Antonio simply decides to get rid of him by killing him. Paul Julian Smith makes the interesting observation that the Antonio character in the film looks like a "void," without a past: "As the figure of passion, absolute and unqualified, he is deprived of the gaps or 'fissures' . . . of other characters" (1994, p. 81). Antonio looks like a subject who is not penetrated by a lack and who also has no questions about his desire or the desire of the Other. Equally crucial is that Antonio has no feeling of guilt and is not in the slightest way sorry for the murder that he has committed. As a psychotic, Antonio is not at all bothered by social prohibitions and has an external relationship to law. Although we do not learn anything about Antonio's past, the film shows that Antonio has an obsessive German mother who is constantly spying on

him. In this context, it is significant that Antonio tries to escape the mother's penetrating gaze by asking Pablo to sign his love letters to him with a woman's name.

Now, what has changed in today's love letters? Cyberspace and virtual love seem to be a repetition of the courtly love that we recall from the past, as people can easily fall in love over the Internet with a distant stranger who might even be extremely manipulative and cruel. It can happen that the love object to whom a writer addresses his love letters is not even a human being; a computer that fakes human responses in chat rooms can very efficiently inspire feelings of love. But more interesting than the phenomenon of falling in love with a fictitious person is that many people today send love letters to themselves. What has happened at the level of the subject's relation to the big Other here?

As we have shown, the neurotic constantly questions what kind of an object he is for the Other, whereas the pervert does not have this dilemma—he is certain that he is the object of the Other's jouissance. Because of this certainty, the pervert rarely enters into analysis and does not try to get from the Other answers to the questions of who he is, and what he wants. The neurotic who constantly deals with these questions is at the end of analysis. He is supposed to come to the point where he does not hystericize himself in the same way and does not expect from the Other any word about his being. But what occurs when the subject wants to avoid dilemmas about the desire of the Other by simply writing love letters to himself?

In the seminar *Encore*, Lacan (1998) points out that love always involves some uncertainty. Because the lover loves what the Other does not have, that is, the lack in the Other, the subject can never get a desired answer from the Other. Lacan even says that knowing what your partner will do is not a sign of love. Love is linked to the fact that at the end we know nothing about the object that attracts us in the Other, and that at the same time the Other knows nothing about this object that is in him more than himself, that is, what makes someone attracted to him. But today it appears that we are trying to alleviate this essential anxiety that accompanies love. People do not want to deal with any uncertainty and thus

either become more and more enclosed (i.e., are able to maintain cyber-relationships that allow them to never actually meet the partner) or want a very precise answer from the Other (and are buying self-help books that will supposedly help them to figure out the desire of the Other).

But when people send love letters to themselves do we have some kind of generalized perversion? As we have shown in the case of *Law of Desire*, a pervert has no doubt about what kind of an object he is for the Other. When people write love letters to themselves on the Internet, we cannot say that we have perversion. We rather have neurotics who still continue to pose questions about the desire of the Other, and since the Other cannot answer, they interpret the desire of the Other and answer in its stead. Today, it appears that the subject who perceives him- or herself as an autonomous rational subject, always able to make informed choices, cannot easily deal with the fact that the Other is barred by constitutive lack. And in order not to deal with this inconsistency of the Other, the subject himself constructs the answer of who he is for the Other and "puts" this answer in the computer's "mouth."

In writing love letters, one constantly feels unable to express love in a proper way or that the words fail to express the depth of love. A similar dilemma occurs when talking about love. In *Love Letters*, Allen says to Singleton (Victoria), "I couldn't possibly say what I'd like to say right now." Singleton asks, "What?" and Allen responds, "I'd like to say you're lovely." To which Singleton responds, "Go ahead, say it. I'd like to hear it." Along with this inability to fully express love with words goes the problem that the Other cannot give a proper response. (Of course, when we talk about the failure of speech in regard to love, we should not forget the famous saying of La Rochefoucauld that men love only if they can talk about love. There is no love outside of speech.) But people who constantly search for advice about how to talk properly about love or try to create the answers of the Other are, of course, never going to find the ultimate advice.

Let us return to Sophie Calle. One of her most interesting art projects was done in the early 1980s when she found an address

book on the streets of Paris that belonged to someone named Paul. Calle decided to learn as much as possible about this person by contacting people whose phone numbers were in the address book. Each day, Calle met with one of these people, and for a whole month *Liberation* published her reports on these meetings. From people's recollections about Paul, we gradually learned many things about his profession in documentary filmmaking, his passions, his odd life routines, and even the fact that he was now away at a film seminar in Norway. When Paul returned to Paris, he was shocked that he had become the object of such an art project and wrote a furious response to the magazine. Paul took the project as an extreme form of violation—an utter intrusion into his private life. But he also stated that as a documentary filmmaker he believes that one should never try to come to grips with another person's life by simply looking at the person from the outside, that is, taking seriously other people's reflections on him or her, but should always give voice to the person in question.

Sophie Calle and Paul never met (at least not at the time of the art project). However, Calle's writings about Paul can almost be taken as a special kind of love letter; although they were addressed to the general public, in the final analysis they very much addressed Paul himself. Paul functioned as a sublime object of attraction that the letters tried to decipher and come close to. But these letters failed in the attempt. Paul's disgust for them shows how the subject can't respond in the way the writer might have expected.

The relation between Sophie Calle and Paul seems like a failed rapport; however, as we know from psychoanalysis, every sexual relationship has failure at its core. Paradoxically, it is from one of Calle's reports on Paul that we can see the logic of such failure in love life. One evening, Calle met with Paul's former lover, Claire, who passionately recounted a film idea that Paul wanted to realize—a love story involving an invisible man and a blind woman.

One can say that in the relationship between Sophie Calle and Paul, he wanted to be the invisible man (i.e., not be exposed in public), and she was the blind woman who, no matter what she

wrote about Paul, did not "see" his essence. But nonetheless, we can speculate that the affair between an invisible man and a blind woman actually might be an ideal love story. Since the invisible man has his eyes intact, he can admire the woman's beauty and be attracted to what is in her more than herself. At the same time, this man does not need to obsess over how the woman sees him, and the woman does not need to be disappointed by what she sees. Maybe the best solution for Cyrano is truly to become an invisible computer man who sends love letters but is not perturbed by a woman's gaze.

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# 3

# *Between the Two* Fears

JULIET FLOWER MACCANNELL

## *FILM NOIR* AND THE MODERN MORAL ORDER: THE RIGHT TO JOUISSANCE

*Film noir* portrays a conflicted modern subject, torn between its symbolic character (desire) and its unconscious lawlessness (drive to jouissance). This conflict is usually mapped onto the social scene as a moral split between "Good" and "Evil" men, and secondarily between "Good" and "Not so Good" girls. But in *film noir* an ambiguity in these splits is especially well projected onto the silver screen.[1] *Noir* has always distinctively illustrated that what is at stake in democratic life and modern Law is invariably *the right to enjoyment*. Prodigiously expanded in modernity, the right to jouissance

1. *Cape Fear's* small city landscape is unusual for *noir*, but not unprecedented. Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943), written in part by Thornton Wilder (author of *Our Town*), was set and filmed in Santa Rosa, California. (Thompson chose Hitchcock's favorite, Bernard Herrmann, to write the score.) See J. F. MacCannell (2000) for an analysis of this film.

(usufruct, enjoyment without ownership) is difficult to legislate by classical means (property rights, for example). Enjoyment is not an *asset*, for unlike wealth it cannot be counted. Unlike real property, it cannot be divided. It does not occupy classical space (a space two bodies cannot occupy at once) for jouissance overthrows Aristotelian principles of non-contradiction and overruns patriarchal enclosures. It overflows symbolic channels and appears as the horizon that lies at the beyond of every logical distinction. Jouissance, in short, is that mythically sublime substance that everyone has an interest in keeping undivided but of which each nonetheless demands his fair share. This sublime substance is not a "good" to be owned individually or collectively, although it plainly tinges contemporary beliefs about "wealth creation" and "economic growth." Riches are "accumulated" at someone else's expense, but jouissance is not. Originally, the verb "*jouir*" is both transitive and intransitive—*enjoier*, "to enjoy," and "to give joy to."

Jouissance is the by-product of human life-in-common, the excess that civilized order creates. If it appears as a unified substance, it is nonetheless born of a crucial division, the invisible demarcation line between the *subject* and the fantasy-*object* of its enjoyment. And jouissance becomes society's central problematic only after the immense revolution in the Law that Rousseau heralded takes place. Rousseau's theory of Law addressed a civil society that was to be uniquely conceived to be a *whole* that was ironically created by its own self-division. Or, as Louis Althusser put it, the signing of the Rousseauian social contract is what *creates* the parties signatory to its pact. Lawmaking in such an oddly divided whole faces an entirely different task from the one faced by antique law. The dilemma for modern Law is not how to forbid jouissance, but how to *enable* it. Its task is to work through the competing claims to jouissance that any and all, each and every, can rightfully make upon the whole.[2]

2. The nature of that whole ("all" or "not-all"? unity or multiplicity? *demos* or *ochlos*?) and its relation to its parts is an issue since the beginning of modern democracy. Democracy means self-legislation. Self-legislation *divides* the whole,

But since jouissance cannot be defined in terms of goods possessed and distributed, its task is hardly simple. All must be freely able to partake of jouissance that results from the division of the whole, and all must be able to participate freely in its correlative polity, democracy. For these two things, universal enjoyment and universal participation, classical strategies of apportionment and distribution (conservative or liberal) are no longer easily applicable. Modern Law is thus called upon to acknowledge the right to enjoyment as a new universal right that cannot be dealt with by repressing knowledge of it, and even less so by forbidding it. (The puritan response breeds libertinism and vice versa.) And yet modern Law is also equally called upon to produce some kind of *limit* to the implacable demands for jouissance that it carries in its wake. It must figure out how to intervene wherever claims to enjoyment by one exclude those of another with equally valid claims—as when Max Cady in J. Lee Thompson's 1962 *Cape Fear* brutally crushes a young woman's aspiration to a bit of enjoyment of her own.

In *Cape Fear* modern Law makes its *noir* entrance in the guise of a "criminal" demand: Max Cady's demand for satisfaction, He embodies modern Law's most transgressive challenge and its very essence at once. The Law cannot ignore such demands, but it has not yet learned how to weigh each one in the light of *all* such claims, nor does it have a sure feel for how to deal with any of them.[3]

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but is the only thing that creates that whole. Recently Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière have revisited the notion of division as crucial to the social whole, a division irreducible to the proliferation of mere differences. The conservative "revolution" launched in the late 1970s (which demanded privatization of public works, parklands, education, and other entities originally produced through social investment) reminds us how unsecured, conceptually and practically, any hint of a universal right to jouissance remains.

3. In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau redefined the principle of Law as *freedom*, not *justice* or *order*. Rousseau found, in short, that (as Lacan said in speaking of Kant) the Law is not the police. After Rousseau, Law is the region of universal freedom: freedom from harassment and oppression by despotic kings and haunting ancestors, freedom to think and do. The Law of Freedom does not put an end to *drive*, however, and even seems to fuel the urge to transgress. See J. F. MacCannell (2004).

Instead, our democracy has tended to paint a bland, formalized picture of what "freedom" and the "right to enjoyment" mean under its laws. It has inclined toward making it simple, reserving enjoyment to those who fit the image of the morally deserving type—upright, ethical, white, male—in short, the film's Sam Bowden. It pictures liberal law as really "working best" in small, homogeneous enclaves (the film's Savannah or contemporary "gated communities"), as if actual size and space limits could make jouissance governable. This is a false, if comforting, notion, for it simply allows excess to run away unchecked "elsewhere." Democracy's current equation of the ownership and accumulation of goods with the singular right to enjoyment that modern democracy originally promises its participants is a confusion that recalls feudal/patriarchal notions. I would say that Thompson's Cady puts the lie to all these strategically evasive practices by forcing open the question of what jouissance really means to and in modern society.

It is through the democratic, Rousseauian revolution that Law today is no longer *only* about the Family. It is not even about intimate social settings, where everyone knows everyone else's business and "behaves" properly because they are policed (ever so politely) by face-to-face interaction. Perhaps most importantly, it is no longer about who "deserves" to enjoy at another's expense. Whenever the Kantian imperative, derived from Rousseau's principles, gets unduly domesticated, made to support only friendly, small town morality, and is cut down to the dimensions of a *Gemeinschaft* world, the modern legal revolution (which must address the [divided] "whole") is obscured and betrayed. Modern Law works *only* if its subjects sustain a struggle to remain signatories to the symbolic pact *of the whole*, against the always compelling, competing, and occasionally compulsory appeals of the archaic.

Thompson's *Cape Fear* makes an immense contribution to the discourses of crime and law and order by bringing out so starkly the enigma of jouissance that modern Law has to contend with. Law must look squarely at the villain of the piece, Max Cady, if it

hopes to resist the return of an antique family-centered Law that would reinstall prescriptive, familial control in place of the freedom that is democratic Law's single real requirement, its single great gift to civilization. Modern democracy's only real limits are internal—a divided whole is intrinsic to its polity and to its subjects, and the inevitable and indivisible remainder of democracy's necessary split is unruly jouissance. Has its Law faced up to its task? It seems rather that the most common response to a claimed right to jouissance remains sub-legal: envy; the fear your neighbor has stolen your enjoyment, giving you the right to deprive him of the enjoyment you have been deprived of, and so on: *Lebensneid*, Lacan says. Ultra-libertarian and puritan never address the lowest motive: envy. It is perhaps no accident, then, that exploring both these motives and the law's possible response to them shows up best in *noir*. The modern Law of freedom must look into the *noir* mirror until sees it own dark face—the face of Max Cady, self-appointed emissary of a Drive that clamors for ever more jouissance, ever more freedom.

At least in Thompson's film. Martin Scorsese's 1992 version deals with jouissance in an entirely different, and definitively postmodern, way that demonstrates where the postmodern and the archaic meet.

## *CAPE FEAR*—THE THOMPSON VERSION

In 1961 actor Gregory Peck asked the British director J. Lee Thompson if he would consider directing a book Peck had optioned, *The Executioners*, by John Dann MacDonald. Thompson agreed. So it was that the last *film noir*, *Cape Fear*, came to be made. It starred Peck and Robert Mitchum in the lead roles of Sam Bowden and Max Cady. A lavish color remake by Martin Scorsese of the original black and white film appeared in 1991.

In the forty years since its first release in 1962, Thompson's medium-grade film has made a nearly indelible mark in a field far

from the theater: the Law.[4] *Cape Fear* has seized the imaginations of legalists, who use it to demonstrate the dilemma of a lawyer's recourse to illegal means to prevent a crime that he knows will be committed and that the police are legally powerless to avert. The troublesome patterning of morality after the eighteenth-century revolutions in the form of the Law (Rousseau, Kant) may account for some of *Cape Fear's* fascination for the legal community. But the film is more than just a complicated juridical puzzle, and I think it is more than a gripping tale of a man intimidated by a vengeful ex-con, a law-abiding, ethical citizen who finds himself forced, vigilante-like, to take desperate measures to prevent harm to his wife and daughter. That kind of story has now become standard fare in "action" films, in which some Father (often Harrison Ford) finds his Family (for whom he doesn't particularly care or toward whom he bears some guilt) threatened by a powerful force that only he can check.

Some of these latter-day Father-as-hero films have even been made by Thompson himself.[5] Yet his *Cape Fear* is far less about "heroized" fathering than it is about the return of the "anal" father and the impossible struggle to reassert a "symbolic" one. Under postoedipal conditions, a reanimated, reinvigorated anal father

4. See the exceptionally well written article by Law Professor Francis M. Nevins (2000), "Cape Fear Dead Ahead: Transforming a Thrice-Told Tale of Lawyers and Law." Legal discussions of the film center on the dilemma of Sam Bowden, a lawyer who must cheat the law to protect his family. But they also, secondarily, address the way the film handles prosecution for rape. The legal status of victims changed after rape shield laws were introduced in 1974, when Michigan passed the first such statute.

5. Long before *Cape Fear*, Thompson had made crime and punishment a favorite theme. An actor and filmmaker in England, he was credited there with several crime films like *Murder without Crime* (1950), *The Weak and the Wicked* (1953), and *Yield to the Night* (1956)—these last two films are about "caged" women convicts. Peck owned the rights to MacDonald's novel and offered Thompson the job while Thompson was directing him in *The Guns of Navarone* (1961). For a detailed account see Nevins (2000) and Henkel (2000). Thompson would later direct two *Planet of the Apes* movies and a great many Charles Bronson vigilante films.

turns the very substance of Law toward perverse and logically unchallengeable ends. Thompson's film[6] accents the bafflement of the Law as it lies between these two "Fathers."

By the time Scorsese makes his version, however, the role of any Father has been radically abridged, and so has the Law. Scorsese's world is a Superegoic one in which the fall of the Father is complete. His film reduces everyone and everything—Cady, Sam, his family, his town—to the Imaginary, which is to say, the Anal Body. Everyone is now freed from the Father, rid of all pretense to symbolic Law, and everyone recognizes anality as the absolute "truth" of human ethical life, with an ascendancy no human Law can contest.

Whether we pretend to be strictly under the Law or think ourselves rid of it, a problem remains: the vexed status of young women in any of the three regimes of archaic patriarchy, symbolic fatherhood, or postmodern anality. Neither film is able to resolve the female dilemma each raises. Yet it is on the shoulders of daughters that Fathers—and their disavowal—are erected.

## ARCHAIC PATRIARCHY

Diane Taylor (Barrie Chase), a worldly young lady in late '50s-style evening dress, rides along in a car with a nattily dressed Max Cady (Robert Mitchum) heading out for a night of fun. She had first noticed Cady, a cool, hypermasculine type, in a cocktail lounge where he was embroiled in an altercation with the police. She was out on a date with another man who obviously bored her, and Cady had caught her eye (and her ear) with a series of clever verbal sallies that smoothly managed to flirt with Diane, insult her date, and resist arrest all at the same time.

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6. In contrast to the novel. See Nevins (2000, pp. 638–639): "Looking back on MacDonald's novel, we see that it's not really centered on law and that nothing important in it would be changed if his Sam Bowden were a businessman or accountant. . . . J. Lee Thompson's film emphasizes legal themes that were peripheral in MacDonald's novel. . . ."

By the time the car scene rolls around in *Cape Fear*, J. Lee Thompson's 1962 film version of John D. MacDonald's 1958 novel, we already know what the restive young lady does not: that Cady is an ex-con who has come to town to terrorize the family of lawyer Sam Bowden (Gregory Peck). Years before, Sam had witnessed Cady's brutal rape of a young girl and had testified against him at his trial. Cady has now served his full term and is out—for revenge. "Miss Taylor" (as she is addressed by Charles Sievers [Telly Savalas], the private eye Sam hires to try to frighten Cady away) knows only that Max exudes a magnetism she describes as "animal":

> *Diane Taylor* (in car with Cady): You're just an animal . . . Coarse, muscled, barbaric. . . . What I like about you is, you're rock bottom. . . . It's a great comfort for a girl to know she could not possibly sink any lower.

She conjectures Cady's "animality" from the way he has so frontally challenged the Law—in the form of the police who try apprehending him *and* in the more general form of "patriarchal" Law, which she obviously chafes under. She resolutely ignores the fact that Cady's "animal" trespasses deploy the Law's principal weapon, language. The conclusion she leaps to regarding Cady's sensuous animal attraction is made to her great misfortune. She imagines Cady is standing *with her* against patriarchal Law and its police since, being a woman, she knows that religious and social representations already value her chiefly as animal *body*; they make a symbolic *head* only of the "man." Indeed, Diane's body language tells us that she feels shorted, cheated of her fair share of pleasure by a regime of "Fathers" that lopsidedly apportions pleasure (and esteem) in favor of men.[7] She expects Cady, as a fellow "animal," to become her ally in resisting the rules that pattern the female's response to the Law, and shape her uneasy relation to the unconscious jouissance her body contains.

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7. Here we cannot help thinking of Lacan's *Encore*, which criticizes the Aristotelian symbolic order as one that favors men over women in the distribution (intended more as a defusing than diffusion) of jouissance.

Long before Cyndi Lauper articulated it, Diane Taylor seems to be a girl who "just wants to have fun." But she still buys into the symbolism of the society whose morality she claims to scorn. She lets Cady/Mitchum know, for example, exactly how bad he looks through patriarchal eyes, telling him that she is slumming with him—but of her own free choice, of course. She snuggles up to Cady and murmurs with excited anticipation that she is in a mood to "go low" and "they don't go much lower than Max Cady." She makes a show of casting aside her social status to seek her pleasure with him.

Cady's response to her arch teasing is to mock her middle-class self-satisfaction with a smirk at her having been named "Queen of the Veiled Prophet's Ball" back home (obviously a "title" of the sort routinely purchased by small-town rich daddies who make charitable "donations" to some sponsoring business club that rigs the contest in their daughters' favor). Diane is impressed enough by her silly queenliness to have told Cady about it, but she is also eager to parade her own disdain for small town society before him, as a place whose social rewards she may love but whose sexual codes she loathes.

When next we see Miss Taylor she is wearing sexy black underwear and is lying on a bed in a cheap rooming house. Max Cady stands at the foot of her bed, preparing to undress, and watches her closely. As Cady gives her the eye, Diane's face grows serious and the shot quickly withdraws, moving us to the far side of the bedroom's closed doors. Through them, in silhouette, we see Cady leaping toward Diane on the bed.

Cut—to detectives breaking down the same door. They are looking to arrest Cady. His harassment of Sam Bowden and his family has carefully skirted illegality and Cady has skillfully avoided giving the police any grounds to jail him or run him out of town. Now the police think they have a chance to get rid of him by charging him with "lewd vagrancy" (i.e., single room occupancy by unrelated adults for purposes of sex). By the time they break in, however, Cady has already fled. As the detectives search in vain for Cady, they stumble over Diane lying crumpled on the floor

beside the bed, obviously dead. The horrified police are turning over her limp body when, with a start, they (and we) realize that her eyes are slowly opening. She is not dead, but she has been beaten unconscious and is viciously battered. As she returns to awareness in the policeman's arms, her dark bruises stand out against her white skin as if mocking the lacy blackness of her sexy lingerie. The scene is an extreme visual shock.[8]

Because of Cady's brutal assault, Miss Taylor hurriedly gives up on "just having fun" and prepares to run back home to her daddy on the next bus out of town. When Sievers, the private detective, begs her to press charges and testify so Cady can be put behind bars, Diane merely repeats, over and over in a dead voice, that Cady has "destroyed" her. It is not just that Cady has threatened her; she is as much (if not more) concerned by the *scandal* that would result from her testimony. She thus resists Sievers firmly, saying, "I'm someone's daughter, too," declaring with finality that she has a family name to uphold.

This is 1962, and there are virtually no "rape shield" laws yet in effect. Since Diane has obviously agreed to go up to the room with Cady, there would be no doubt that sex was consensual. Her seductive way of dressing and her general aura of "easiness" would win no sympathy for her in a jury of her peers, either in a court of Law or in the court of small town gossip. Her shock is doubled by the fact that, looked at soberly, Cady's assault on her shows that he has not gone up against the patriarchy at all; to the contrary, he has effectively done its dirty work for it. In Cady, Diane has psychologically met up with the "reality principle" that Freud called the "pleasure principle's" natural limit. And she has socially encountered Walter Benjamin's "law-preserving violence"—the thuggish arm that keeps patriarchal order in force. The net effect of the assault is to send her home to Daddy and to ensure that her family's good name is not as blackened as her eyes. If Diane had wanted to

8. I had forgotten about this scene when, around 1984, I rented the 1962 version for my young sons. They still shudder at the name of "Max Cady."

defy patriarchal limits on women by sexually misbehaving with a man whom she thought her ally against them, she had plainly never counted on meeting up with a man who was so singularly exempt from *any* social constraints as Max Cady seems to be. At the same time, Diane's hasty retreat to her father's home to uphold the patronymic (her family's "good" name) shows that Cady has done outstanding work on behalf of the patriarchal control of women.

Let me be clear here about what I mean by "patriarchal" law and "control of women" because it is indeed the division between *patriarchal law* and *democratic law* that is the fulcrum of *Cape Fear's* energetic twists and turns. By "patriarchy" I am referring not to the Father's *symbolic* face, such as Jacques Lacan has described it, that is, the Name-of-the-Father, in all its psychoanalytic persistence as crucial pivot for organizing the subject (and thus society) along symbolic lines. I mean the historical Laws, dating from Western antiquity, that installed the *family* as the cornerstone of legislative codes, such as the Laws meticulously written down for the first time under the Roman emperors. As Jacques Rancière has made clear, however, patriarchal law already was well established in Greek democracy, where the patronymic (the names of "Good" Families) formed the backbone of political and legal structure (see Rancière 1995).

Modern society is no longer organized around the familial model, and ever since Rousseau framed his *Social Contract*, our laws have taken on a dimensionality and a suprafamilial character foreign to Greco-Roman Law.[9] Ours is a symbolic Law, universal in character, and general in content (singularly few in specific prohibitions and bans). In these particulars it differs radically from the ancient family-aligned laws that Cady instinctively enforces. And

9. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau's precise arguments against the paternal model and the family pattern for organizing modern society (against Aristotle, Caligula, and Hobbes, among others) in *The Social Contract I*, ii. Napoleon rationalized, synthesized, and modernized French law in his *code civil*, and based his *code* on Rousseau's principles. The *code* supplanted Roman law for much of Europe, and Napoleon considered it his finest achievement. Until his reform, Roman, Frankish, and Christian law all shared legal jurisdiction.

yet it is the vexed status of this second kind of Law that the film makes its central issue.

Under antique patriarchally oriented laws, behaviors were *prescribed* (i.e., there were duties that needed to be fulfilled, usually toward the family), and they were also *proscribed.* A family's good name, for example, depended on the orderly sexual conduct of its women, and thus adultery was proscribed. But the way the laws were written in Rome allows us to see that the issue was not merely assuring legitimate heirs. The real issue was reinforcing the Father's dominion over the family. Thus it is that under Roman Law a Father could legally kill his daughter if he found her to be adulterous, but the same was not true of his own wife.[10]

Without a patriarchal social context for his acts, Cady nonetheless effectively mimes the force of archaic law, visiting its punitive fury on women (loose women, young women out alone) who violate its antiquated prescriptions for female comportment. Cady's violent message is, however, dual. He supports patriarchal attitudes, and his existence is bent on challenging the modern (legal) belief that society is governed by a law that references a symbolic order

10. Although the more usual punishment was exile. See the Augustan laws (circa 18 B.C.), which established adultery as a crime punishable by exile and confiscation of property (Emperor Augustus exiled his own daughter Julia for the offense). It permitted a father to kill his daughter and the daughter's adulterous lover. Husbands who did kill their wives for adultery were treated with leniency, however. Interestingly, women who ran businesses or shops could not be guilty of adultery. There were many specific prohibitions on whom one could marry, including proscription on intermarriage between senators and actresses, for example. Roman Law was concerned not with rights, but with failings in prescribed duties, for example, dereliction toward family piety, failure to adhere to state holidays, and the failure to uphold the Roman way of life—what today we might call the "family values"/patriotism complex espoused by our own right wing. The point is that classical law defined the *boundaries within which one could act.* In contrast, our laws define and preserve our rights, and with them, our *freedom of action.* It is our responsibility to act with justice and concern for the rights of others, but we are prescribed no specific behavioral norms for this. Our behavior is our *choice.* Diane Taylor tries to straddle both kinds of Law, largely because neither suits her situation as a *woman.* The first is far outmoded for her, but the second has failed to address itself sufficiently to her sexual difference.

beyond the familial level.[11] He forces us to recognize that family "law" retains enormous power over modern subjective life. Diane Taylor's refusal to bear witness against Cady proves that, for all his obvious criminality, Cady has not fundamentally transgressed the psychical law that grants a primal Father ultimate power over the girl's unconscious and programs her reaction in moments of fear. Diane retreats to the shelter of the symbolic father (who is only a psychical way of representing the rules of society). Thus the modern subject (under the "new" Law of democracy that Rousseau announced) would seem to be free, but the fact that a Cady can exist challenges the notion that the subject is completely rid of its fundamental phantasm, that the Law's violent progenitor—the terrifying *père jouissant*—can and will return.

Diane had foolishly imagined she could take advantage of both kinds of regime: she could invoke the name of the Family/Father when it suited her, and take advantage of the subjective, sexual freedom granted by modern society (the regime of the Brother) when she felt like doing that. Her black and blue marks visually represent a catastrophic end to that illusion. Cady crudely forces Diane to choose between Family and Society. All Diane ends up "knowing" is that being "somebody's daughter" protects her better than her own judgment, democratic society, and its tardy police can. What she does not grasp is that a virulent form of patriarchy is what psychically animates her assailant.

## SYMBOLIC PATERNITY

Diane Taylor is a casualty of the conflict between the Real "father" of her unconscious and the social, symbolic "brotherly father" of

11. All of which Jacques Rancière places under the label of the *arkhé*: "Democracy is not a political regime. Insofar as it is a rupture of the logic of the *arkhé*, in other words, of the anticipation of rule in the disposition for it, it is the regime of politics as a form of relationship defining a specific subject" (Rancière 2000).

democratic Law. But so is every woman of this era. Nominally (but not really) she is a full citizen with rights. Nominally (but not really) she is a "free" woman: that is, she is still very much under man's mastery. If Diane appears to *choose* the law of "home" and "Father" over the democratic Law of courts and legal systems, it is because (like its police) democratic Law comes too late to save her from harm—and it has not yet arrived to free her from mental domination by her family and its "name." She remains very much a subject of the power and prestige of a (legally outmoded) patriarchal order. And that antique order is obviously still alive and well, still functioning with full force in small town America).[12]

That a Max Cady can and does erupt from within modern society as a brutal, self-appointed enforcer of male mastery over women prompts us to realize that archaic patriarchal Law persists—in the unconscious: in Cady's and that of his female victim. His unwelcome presence indicates less a mental aberration than a weak point in the great universality and generality of democratic Law: the fact that it does not fully extend its protections to women—or, if you read the film's veiled codes properly—to its black members, either.[13] Cady's destructive arrival rattles a society that thought itself moderately modern and reasonably postpatriarchal; it is these complacent assumptions that he shakes down to the root. Once Cady appears, Bowden's life (like the town's) becomes a series of impasses and stalemates. Sam Bowden is, after all, a lawyer who grasps Cady's malevolent intentions, and who invokes the law's protection from them. But the law is impotent to shield him, and Sam is forced to try illegitimate action as preemptive strikes against the ex-con. All fail miserably. The reasons are linked to his (and the modern Father's) particular relation to the Law.

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12. Like his countryman Alfred Hitchcock, Thompson seemed attuned to a certain dark side of Middle America. *Cape Fear* was shot on location in Savannah, Georgia, in 1961. This moderate-sized city is made by the film to seem much like Main Street, USA, a small, conservative, quiet town.

13. Nevins notes a black civil rights tone in the film, as when the Southern police chief repeatedly calls Cady "boy." The original novel is set in upstate New York, not the South.

In Thompson's film (but not in MacDonald's novel) Sam Bowden is Cady's opposite. He is a strong spokesman for rights' Law, including the rights of the accused. Sam's kind of Symbolic Law—our kind of law—is not designed to block the subject's freedom even if the subject is likely to transgress. Cady represents the irrational remnants of *another* kind of Law and Order (patriarchal) than the modern, democratic one we assume we live under. He draws out the "irrational" and nonsensical remainders of paternal power that remain in place even under democracy and thus, however vile, his actions also challenge Bowden's democratic law to be more consistently applied.

Cady is an enormous thorn in the side of the law, practically and theoretically, and he eventually proves exceptionally destructive to Bowden's upholding of it, especially where it accents civil liberties and civil rights over "family values." In fact, we could say that, by the time Cady goads Bowden into smashing in his face at the end of the film, he has effectively brought out the kernel of the Real Father in Sam. As Sam crushes Cady's skull with a boulder we find a (neo)neolithic end to the sober, restrained, reflective, and entirely decent bourgeois *père de famille* that Gregory Peck's Bowden is.

## THE ANAL FATHER AND THE LAW

In a highly lucid analysis, Law Professor Francis Nevins has reviewed the legal points that stud *Cape Fear*. Whereas Nevins makes light of the often risible legal errors in Martin Scorsese's remake of 1991, he takes Thompson's early '60s film seriously enough to have taught it for years in his law school seminars. He notes that legal scholars have debated its implications ever since it appeared,[14] and he is intrigued by the climate of opinion that was in force when the film was made and released: the Warren Court context of sup-

14. Starring Nick Nolte and Robert De Niro in the original Peck and Mitchum roles, with Mitchum and Peck now playing minor characters.

port for civil rights and protection for the accused. Nevins proposes that the heart of Thompson's film is Cady's unexpected use of contemporary law's safeguarding of individual rights as a weapon against itself:

> One of the film's most significant additions to MacDonald's novel is that the cinematic Cady is not just a sadistic psychopath out to destroy the Bowden family as in the novel but one who has his own lawyer, knows the law, and uses it as a weapon. This innovation permits the filmmakers to ask a question which at most is only hinted at in the novel: Has our legal system vested the sociopaths among us with such a panoply of rights that we are no longer safe? [2000, p. 622]

Bowden has no recourse to the law to ward off Cady. Cady's threats to Sam and his family are veiled, and Cady is not *officially* a criminal until he commits a crime.[15] (The point of the film is not to question this quasi-Heideggerian definition of "the criminal" who, like the artist, is what he "is" only by virtue of what he will have "done." Nor is the film a brief for "vigilantism" as a necessary supplement to a modern law that wimpily lets criminals go free or paroles them to "do it again," as right-wingers assert.) Thompson's *Cape Fear* (not MacDonald's book and not the Scorsese remake) is about the *limits of the Law not only toward, but within the subject.* It is about the fact that Sam Bowden faces as many internal *subjective* constraints as *objective* legal ones when he is faced with the threat Cady represents. Under our laws, the subject feels (or like Cady, perversely fails to feel) that the freedom it grants must be checked by individual conscience, choice, and responsibility. Cady scoffs at this as equivocation and pusillanimity. Bowden has to wrestle with it.

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15. The salient contradictions of post-Rousseauian Law are made obvious when Cady's menace does not at first result in any actual violence against Bowden. The Bowden family dog is poisoned, but Cady maintains that he is not responsible. We do indeed *see* the results of his violence on Diane's face and body, but we do not "catch him in the act" and she won't testify: hence he has committed no crime, legally speaking.

While in prison for the rape for which Sam's eyewitness testimony helped convict him, Cady has become quite the expert in modern Law. He has especially learned this: that our Law is preoccupied not with what we *might* do, and not with what we *fail* to do (e.g., duty, honor our parents), but only with what we *actually* do. We do not preemptively legislate *intent*; we only adjudicate it after the fact of a crime. Only then is intent submitted to judgment, given its day in court and a good "read" by a jury of one's peers. Our Law takes seriously the freedom it grants us, and its fundamental assumption is that any crime we commit is of our own free choice. But where others, like Sam, think of this freedom of choice as a goad to conscience, Cady sees only an opportunity to gain advantage over his trusting peers.

Cady, who has studied the law minutely, knows that there is precious little in the Law to allow the police to restrict his activities, even if they strongly suspect he intends to harm Bowden. So Cady tantalizes the Savannah police with the hope of their cooling him in jail on vague charges. But at each point where the police imagine they will be able to pressure him ("informally") by threatening arrest or giving him pointed advice to get out of town, Cady responds with the fine points of the law, retains a lawyer, and makes it clear he plans to stay put.

The town's Chief of Police, Mark Dutton (Martin Balsam), is at a loss: "You show me a law that prevents crime. All we can do is act after the fact." Using their normal paralegal tactics to dissuade Cady from staying, they arrest him as a "vagrant," but he counters with case law that says a person with money cannot be arrested for vagrancy, and he has taken the precaution of carrying a bank book showing plenty of cash on hand. He knows his *rights*, and he knows that, in American democracy, the Law is designed to leave the subject free.

Cady is not, then, an inexplicable monster who terrorizes a society that has failed to extirpate him or keep him locked away. It is quite the other way around: the systematic Cady has been as much *produced by* retributive Law, carceral punishment, and the legal briefs he has diligently studied in prison as he ever was by

"nature." Indeed, Cady borrows the Warren Court's most liberal-minded legal rhetoric to demand his civil rights.

Cady's wily legal knowledge only adds spice to the real drama being played out here: the agony of a Law divided against itself, intended on the one side to provide for universal equal justice, and on the other pitted against the problematic of a freedom it has itself unleashed, and that Cady proves is fundamentally unconstrained and unconstrainable.[16] Cady shows us that the Law lacks any solid foundation—metaphysical, religious, or otherwise. He instead calls the question of what crime is under a regime of self-legislation, and how a Law of *freedom* ever checks its own excesses.

Mainstream viewers and legal scholars alike who puzzle over the film feel as frustrated by Cady (and the challenge to the Law he represents) as Sam is, and they tend to take the easy out of turning Cady into a figure of "pure" evil, beyond the pale of Law. This is a nice way of evading the issue that he is clearly *a product of the Law* and that he induces the law-abiding Sam to resort to criminal acts. Even Nevins, who has examined thoroughly the extreme legalism of Cady's posture, loses hold of his own insight and rather abruptly declares that the film is aesthetically premised as a "*descent from legality* to the *law of the jungle*": "Max Cady['s] cigar and Panama hat and body language as he lopes along and into the courthouse, evoke a feral creature invading civilized space" (2000, p. 622, my emphasis). Like "Miss Taylor," pinning "natural" brutishness on Cady would put him nicely *outside* the Law, excusing in advance all illegal behaviors toward him or with him. But to place Cady on the side of the animals is to miss the crucial point: that Cady has appeared, and can only have appeared *within* society. Civil order and the Law have, quite literally, constructed him. If Max Cady is a "feral creature" he is one who knows the Law—statute by statute.

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16. "Mitchum mockingly addresses Peck not as Lieutenant as in the novel but as Counselor, and the real-world events with which the film connects are the civil rights movement and the revolution in criminal procedure that was about to be launched by the Warren Court" (Nevins 2000, p. 621).

Nevins's "Law of the Jungle" is a blind alley, for we cannot really picture Cady as some Rousseauian *sauvage* transported unmodified into advanced society and taking its freedom in a horrifyingly literal way. Cady is not unconstrained by legal limits, for it is legal limits that have made him what he is: a creature *of* civilization, who has figured out that he can frighteningly dispense with its key component—a guilty conscience. Kant and Rousseau had counted on conscience to hold our deep-seated antisocial impulses in check, but as Freud and several centuries of baleful experience have taught us, the voice of conscience is no match for the Drives.

Cady is pure drive, an urge against the laws that would not exist without them. If he resembles something "animal" it is a psychical animality produced as an afterimage by the Law (or by what Lacan would call the work of language and the signifier). The real question is thus not that of civilization against itself, but of civilization as *the very sum of the discontents that it brew within it.* These discontents are the force of Drive, created by the framing of Law and its unconsciously extant remainders in the subject. Once the Law is given an official face of freedom rather than prohibition, *drives* reach a new level of intensity and require a new force of symbolic cut to resist them.

*Cape Fear* is not essentially about Cady's physical intimidation of women, but about his *psychological* reign of terror over Sam Bowden, who is unprepared to understand the drives that Cady represents. But if both he and Sam were not equally subjects of the unconscious, of Drive, Cady's terror would be ineffective. As a pair, Sam and Cady reveal the Law as not merely Symbolic and oedipal in character (a law of castration, of the Symbolic father). Taken together, the Sam-Cady couple demonstrates that Law has its dark side—the side of the Drive that impels it, again and again, to become what it is. Law is no more and no less than the persistent struggle against the brutal fantasies that must accompany its installation in the subject. Lacan writes:

> The Law is not simply, in fact, something about which we ask why the human community introduced it and is implicated

> in it. It is also based in the real, under the form of this kernel that the Oedipus complex leaves behind. . . . [1994, p. 211, my translation]

What the Oedipus complex leaves behind is the Superego:

> This tyrannical superego, deeply paradoxical and contingent, represents by itself, even in non-neurotics, the signifier which marks, imprints, leaves the seal in man of his relation to the signifier. There is in us a signifier which marks our relation to the signifier, and that is called the superego. There are even many more than one, called symptoms. [1994, p. 212, my translation]

Freud (1961) described the Superego arising upon the *dissolution* of the Oedipus complex. Its advent brings "death" to the prestige that paternal parental Law holds in the formation of the subject (the Father's "no" is installed unconsciously in the subject as a ban on incest). The Superego disarticulates the subject from the Symbolic Father (and his lining of fear—fear of the Real Father) by articulating subjective freedom: freedom *from* the Father's dominion; freedom *to* enjoy. About the Father, the Superego tells us: "He'd never really castrate you!" which, put another way, implies, "He's *merely* Symbolic." Yet even while the Superego persuades the child he is free, the crudeness and raw force of the *Ur-Vater's* jouissance is settling into his body, inhabiting it and inhibiting it at the same time.

Let me put it in political as well as psychoanalytic terms. We might say that the democratic Law of freedom has its correlate in the figure of the Superego that Lacan calls the cardinal point of our contemporary ethical compass. Why? It coalesces the freedom declared by Rousseauian/Kantian Law with the same freedom revoiced in so singular and perverse a way by Sade.

The Superego is structured *like* the Real, but it is not the Real. It is a voice, a representative of the Real that uses the resources of the Symbolic, language. There is no better analogy for Max Cady than the obscene Superego, voicing open skepticism regarding the

Symbolic, oedipal father. His is a "bite of the Real" that Cady injects into Bowden's family and their town's social life, and he does so with all the repetitive force of unconscious fantasy. Cady confronts Sam (the *merely symbolic* father) with the fact that symbolic stature is never secured once and for all; it must be re-won again and again by facing off against lethal jouissance (the aim of Drive). The more actual fathers have grown into comfortable (flat, Imaginary) stereotypes of themselves, the less prepared they are to rouse the mental labor required for them to meet the accelerating power of Drive. The Father who takes his "Symbolic" place for granted is no longer Symbolic, but Imaginary, like a '50s TV Dad, with no edge, no ferocity, no possessiveness, no threat to exact compliance with the Symbolic limit to jouissance: no force of Law. Sam Bowden is nothing if not just such a later '50s type of "Dad," living a calmly protected life in a commodious middle-class home. Bowden's self-view as "good" dulls him to the fact that to be a Symbolic father requires a dose of the *Real* Father for its enforcement.[17]

Thompson's film makes Cady's eruption in Sam's life a goad to a Father weak in the Symbolic function. Cady provokes Sam to show him his Real, threatening side, the side Sam had imagined safely under control of the Law. Cady demonstrates to Sam that the lawyer, too, retains some of the archaic father's anal features, for what, after all, is Cady challenging Sam for, if not the possession of his "women"? And what does his challenge mean but that, even though it's under cover of the Law, the Symbolic Father is keeping exclusive possession of his women, just like the primal father. Cady's presence brings home to Sam that even the "Symbolic" father has a grain of the old one by forcing him to invoke his claims to his wife and daughter. After all, apart from the poisoned dog (for which Cady protests his innocence), what Cady threatens to execute is nothing less than the rape of *both* Bowden's wife and his teenage daughter. When Cady traps Sam's wife Peggy

17. See Lacan (1994) for the discussion of the "*carence du père*" in his rereading of Freud's case of "Little Hans."

(Polly Bergen) he says he will rape her—and what's more, he will do so *legally*:

> And you a lawyer's wife? Don't you understand? That with consent there's no charges against me. . . . I was going to go for Nancy. But I can always make it with Nancy, you know, next week, next month. . . . You proposition me. You instead of Nancy. And I'll agree never to see you again. . . . Unless of course you want it. Now that's how you give your consent.[18]

Cady puts Bowden under extreme pressure to act like the possessor of his female goods; what is remarkable about *Cape Fear* is that Sam responds to this pressure, and does precisely that. He doesn't bag his possessiveness, or ignore that he is acting like the "Real" father, for he comes to terms with the realization that a certain Father-like ferocity is required to meet the enhanced level of Drive that the Law itself has brought into play.

*Cape Fear* thus shows us that any "clear" opposition between the archaic Real Father and the modern Symbolic Father is a falsification: they coexist in the same subject, particularly in Sam, a lawyer who has witnessed against brutality and fulfilled his civic legal duty to testify against its perpetrator (Cady) in court. Until Cady reappears Sam had been able to tell himself that such archaic violence was only an atavistic throwback to prerational times, that it was foreign to him and to his role. He had delegated responsibility for dealing with transgression to the legal system. The Laws themselves that have created this new form of monstrosity cannot, however, logically, dissipate the Drive that they themselves have created. Their own symbolic arrangements have ratcheted Drive up beyond all hope of containment by symbolic means.[19] Only a

18. See Nevins (2000, p. 641) for the Georgia rape law of the day.

19. The best image of this force I have come across is that of Lacan's turbine placed in the middle of the Rhine in *Seminar IV*. The natural flow of water has an energy quotient that the mill's turbine revs beyond all natural bounds. This excess energy then requires ever greater efforts at control, containment, and disbursement.

dose of the Real Father, who acts to meet a *return* of the Real, can make that happen.

This does not mean what right-wingers think it does: that violence must be met with violence. In fact the opposite is true. What the film tells us is precisely *not* that brutality can be extirpated by brutality or even contained carcerally: it tells us, rather, that *resistance* to the return of the Real comes not from the abstract legal system, but by finding the resources within to resist the brutality whose source is in the unconscious—in "ours" and "theirs" alike. The film tells us that the Real is not "out there" somewhere beyond the symbolic, but precisely within it. And in Sam. He must work at drawing the line between whatever mad drive in himself might will him to be the anal Father, and his drawing the line takes the externalized form of Cady's challenge to him. The scene of the crime in Thompson's film is ultimately *Sam's* crime: his "murder" of the Real done to reestablish an unestablishable Symbolic Law, a murder that acknowledges that it *is* obscene drive even as it resists it.

Sam's task (as a Symbolic Father) is to make Cady feel the bite the Symbolic takes out of the Real. The Symbolic Father makes an active cut, slicing off the Real Father's raw savagery.[20] Cady's presence figuratively foregrounds violence, and for the Symbolic to make a *cut* of/in the Real a second violence is required—a violence to this violence. If Sam comes off seeming in the end more "guilty" than Cady it is also because he is the agent of this violence, an agency mirrored by the film's cutting techniques. The editing carefully gaps the representation of the violent act, and this elision suffuses the film with an ambience of guilt (the hallmark of a symbolic dimension). It is a guilt from which Cady, the perpetrator, is uniquely exempted. We don't have to look at his violent acts, and

20. The era eschewed even simulated gore and violence. The film formally acts the part of *symbolic* Law when it edits out Cady's violent acts. It sets an excellent example of how the Symbolic emerges by excluding and "murdering" the Real. The "cut" is *the* essential metaphor, the move that permits the brutality of an Ur-Father to be transformed into the equity of a (merely) Symbolic Father. Veiled threats of violence are ultimately the support of paternal law, a violence that Cady accentuates.

we are all too happy to take the "out" that the film's avoidance of presenting his violence gives us. The "symbolic cut" protects us from the guilty knowledge not only of Cady's violence, but of the Father's necessary violence, too.

The struggle in Sam is almost Biblical: a *noir* Jacob wrestling with a much darker angel. It is the allegory of a deeper conflict within himself, between the Symbolic and the Real Father, locked forever in eternal combat. By battling Cady, Bowden is made to become a Real Father, one who will actually lay claim to own his women against the one who challenges him for their possession. Does Sam kill Cady because he threatens Sam's exclusive claims on his wife and daughter? Yes and no. Does he kill to realize the Real in himself, or does he kill Cady to reclaim his Symbolic status (as-that-which-murders-the-Real)? Yes and no. The heart of the film is Bowden's confronting the kernel of the Real Father in himself and rising to the challenge of overtly using and refusing its obscenity. His blow to Cady is Sam's first step to reoccupancy of a symbolic paternal role he has assumed, but never really taken on.

The moment Sam finds he must kill off Cady he acquires depth—and the guilt—that make his "fatherhood" more than flatly Imaginary. It is the conflict in Bowden that makes *Cape Fear* so unusual a film and also removes it from the trivial genre of "dad going all out to save his family from terrorists," films that imitate while missing its crucial substance. Bowden is no Charles Bronson, sure of his own Goodness and out to avenge his injured family; and Thompson's *Cape Fear* is not a vigilante revenge flick of the kind Thompson later went on to direct. The film clarifies that the Symbolic standing of the Father, the Law of the Father, comes at a price—the price of having to confront the fact that it has fathered the Drive it must resist. It is no accident then, that this film not only predicted the coming decade's extension of rights to women and to American blacks, it also demonstrated the psychical struggle that would be required for the Symbolic to knot itself to new subjects. In his daughter's case, what Sam's taking on real *symbolic* paternity should have meant is that he would have to allow her to

become the subject of the law's freedom—and its protections as well—outside the patriarchal home.

## *NOIR* AND GUILT

Thompson's film is *noir* in look and tone—its cinematography has conscious reminiscences of the genre (which by 1962 was all but dead). The *noir* ambience signals that we are in the mental space of the obscene Superego who supplants the Father in the unconscious of its subjects (see Copjec 1993); its story is the story of the Father the Superego declares dead who nonetheless returns to dispute the Superego's displacement of him from a supreme position in the unconscious. The heart of *Cape Fear's noir* comes from its overwhelming sense of a violently lethal jouissance at large within the parameters of human "civilized" life—and uncontrolled by it. It is loose not only in big, alienated cities, but in small, rural towns, close to nature—near woods, swamps, and bayous. It is loose in the very ordinary life of a very law-abiding lawyer. It looms up in face of the lawyer's conventional wife, Peggy, and threatens his clean-cut daughter, Nancy, both obviously very "good" girls. It looms up for Diane Taylor, a naughty girl who wants to be a little bit wild. It is loose, perhaps, in Sam Bowden himself.

And not one of them has the faintest idea of how to deal with it.

Thompson uses the aesthetic codes and ethical ambiguities of urban *noir* and has them shockingly invade the small-town and the family home. The director even chose *noir*-master Alfred Hitchcock's favorite composer, Bernard Herrmann, to write the score, and the film conscientiously imports the dark tones of MacDonald's novel, which had likewise implicated the family in an indistinct *noir* morality. Where does this legally compromised but fully Symbolic Father leave his "family" and its "values" then? If ours is a Law of Freedom we must look at the other face of that freedom: the face of Max Cady, so uncannily mimetic of the

paradoxes of our subjective relation to the Law. His face represents *Drive*, not *nature*, and it refers us to what is always at stake in the *noir* genre as in democratic life: the Jouissance that Drive aims at; that it circles and misses, each failure to reach its object fueling its renewed demand for "more."

Max Cady is no innocent; he stands rather precisely for a *drive* that is human in nature, but that no human laws can ever fully constrain—because they are its source. He is a fury grown beyond all bounds by the very containment the laws have attempted to impose on it, emblematized by his prison term. In this sense, Thompson's film illustrates what Lacan noted around the same time the film was made. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan speaks of a problematic within the Law (as generality and freedom)—that appears after Kant (really Rousseau), who cast the Law free from its classic requirement to keep social life orderly. Rousseau/Kant found that Law is not the police; it is the region of a universal freedom (from harassment and oppression; from arbitrary kings and haunting ancestors alike). The downside is that the Law of Freedom does not put an end to *drive*, but rather fuels the urge to transgress what of Law remains, even a Law of freedom.

Cady represents this troubling aspect of our Law, and he does so in a vivid way that disturbs. Turning up in a conservative Southern town, Max Cady looms up to give the lie to its self-conscious goodness on every level. He takes advantage of the freedom from restrictions the Law offers, yet is unencumbered by the prick of conscience. He is the obscene possibility that haunts modern law, whose democratic principle of "freedom" finds its *other* or hidden principle in what supports that desire: the "truth" of the subject, its "Thing." Recognizing this is crucial to our kind of law, Lacan writes,

> For there is a register of morality which is directed from the side of what there is at the level of *das Ding*, namely the register which makes the subject hesitate at the moment of bearing false witness against *das Ding*, that is, the site of his desire, be it perverse or sublimated. [1992, p. 109]

Thus far, however, we have found Thompson's *Cape Fear* to be making a way for the Father to retrieve his position against its termination by a Drive energized by all efforts to repress it.

What then, of *woman*, who has no position of authority to retrieve? Let us regard Diane Taylor once more in the light of the Law's obscene double. Under the Law, Max Cady walks away scot-free from the Miss Taylor episode, but he also walks away more than a bit scot-free from our moral censure, which is framed by the film's own aesthetic coding. The film itself is an agent of Symbolic deletion, of the cut that elides the actual moment of his violence. This cut permits guilt to fall instead on Diane, who does not resist violence with violence, and whose upholding of her family name lacks the physical courage of Sam's final acts and has no particularly redeeming social merit. Diane is notably the only one in the film who really comes out "looking bad," in both the physical and moral sense.

Guilt also falls on Sam, but less so than on Diane. The Diane who simply wanted to mix pleasure and danger is made to bear the mark of crime, physically and morally. The audience might sympathize with Diane, but in the end they will say, "She should have known better. She got what she was looking for. She shouldn't have trusted this guy. She rejected conventional morality and wisdom, and now it's come back to bite her." As I have pointed out, this is because she is not fully credited with being a *subject* of the Law. Diane must simply take "crap."

One might have hoped that, by the 1990s, women would be depicted with a sense of their own truth as an internal conflict (like Sam's) between the Real of their drive and the choice of their desire. Instead, Scorsese's 1991 remake proposes no "symbolic" solution for woman. The triumph of the anal father in Scorsese's version is so complete that the father disappears altogether as a point of orientation for the subject's resistance to the pressure of Drive. The result is an unimpeded anal enclosure of women, especially of women still very much valued primarily as "bodies." Their retention by the anal father is the more complete the "freer" from the Symbolic father they appear to be.

## *CAPE FEAR* TWO: MARTIN SCORSESE'S ANAL BODIES

Thompson's black and white *Cape Fear* brought back an appreciation for the task of the Symbolic, once the Superego emerges. It vividly projected the Superego dilemma of the modern subject (free to enjoy limitlessly, yet hemmed in by a million restrictions). The problematic of Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* is entirely different. The first version's *noir* atmosphere has evaporated, replaced by a color-saturated visuality that slots it somewhere between thriller and horror. The Superego that was a *hidden* factor in the first film is put directly on stage in the second, visually embodied (and thus fully Imaginary in Lacan's sense) by the second Max Cady, played by a hate-filled Robert De Niro. Scorsese's film is about jouissance now openly visible as the obscene "Truth" of Symbolic Law, which it fully discredits, and from this implacable truth there is no appeal—not because it is transcendental, but because it is purely Imaginary. Indeed, for all the posturing De Niro's Cady makes to resemble The Thing, Scorsese's film had nothing to do with the Real that lends the Symbolic its depth and its raison d'être. Unlike the horrifying Real that Sam stumbles across and that causes his recoil in Thompson's film, Scorsese's film presents a simulated *Ding* that initially revolts, but ultimately seduces. And what it seduces is the weak link in all Law: the body of the women it has never properly covered.

If I say that this film has to do with the Imaginary, there's a reason. For Lacan, the body is imaginary, a two-dimensional flatness, a canvas for the "truth" of a jouissance written inadvertently where symbolic law has failed to prevent its return. The *symbolic* body is where jouissance never stops NOT being written (see Lacan 1998); the *anal* body is where the mark of jouissance drips like a coating all over it. The subjective dimensionality of Thompson's film came by re-winning Symbolic depth from the flat Imaginary through a frontal dispute with the Real for dominion over fathering. Scorsese's film is about an Imaginary version of the Real that skips the Symbolic: it is framed as a realized *fantasy*.

Everything in Scorsese's version works at the level of *appearance*—its stages a fantasy of the Real that has a flat, two-dimensional feel, despite the film's florid coloration. The Bowden family has "good" looks and "bad" character; De Niro's Cady has defiantly "bad looks," which he thrusts into everyone's face. He affects a white "cracker" style of get-up, with tattoos, long greasy hair, ill-assorted cheap clothes. But his looks intentionally fall short of being a fashion "statement," for he operates on the same visual plane as that of the Bowdens, only even flatter: He *is* exactly what he looks like. De Niro's Cady, in conformity with the special Law of Scorsese films, denies the very existence of Law. To Cady (and perhaps to Scorsese), there is no Law, but only a regime of hypocrisy and pretense. His game is to "out" hypocrites by displaying their ugly truth.

Compare Mitchum's conventionally handsome Cady, dressed in clothes that only *symbolize* his "just-on-the-other-side-of-the-law-ness": hat brim just a little too broad and worn at not quite the proper angle, suit elegant, but with a hint of the hipster and the Zoot. Mitchum's style carefully mocks the society he requires; without society he is not a criminal. De Niro's Cady doesn't bother with dress as *symbolism*; whatever he wears is intended to point directly to its "true" body beneath. His is a body that openly wears its *bona fides*, the searing letters of jouissance.[21] If he has none of the flair of Mitchum and nothing of his veiled animal magnetism, De Niro's Cady is meant to embody a brute force on which Symbolic Law has left only its faintest and most ironic traces, like the twisted Christian slogan he sports as tattoos: "Vengeance is mine," "My time is at hand," "The Lord is my avenger," "My time is not yet full come."

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21. As Lacan says, "*Ce surmoi tyrannique, foncièrement pardoxal et contingent, représente à lui seul, même chez les non-névrosés, le signifiant qui marque, imprime, laisse le sceau chez l'homme de sa relation au signifiant. Il y a chez l'homme un signifiant qui marque sa relation au signifiant, et cela s'appelle le surmoi. Il y a en a même beaucoup plus d'un, cela s'appelle les symptômes*" (1994, p. 212).

Law and crime are thus put on an entirely different footing in Scorsese's film. It is no longer a question of the subject fending off a floodtide of jouissance, shit, and other unseemly emanations of the Real. The 1991 film is about the imaginary shit that covers the body as its flip side, the fecal lining of the body no longer merely a fantasmatic, object a, its desire's hidden "core," but its very being. Scorsese's Sam Bowden (Nick Nolte), for example, is a sleaze who has cheated on his wife (Jessica Lange), can barely control his daughter (Juliette Lewis), is doing his secretary, who is an unethical lawyer, yet is nonetheless treated like a respectable man. To Cady (and perhaps to Scorsese, too) the streamlined prettiness of Bowden's family is the mark of the anal body, designed to look "perfect" and to mask the dreck that is its other side. Cady will bring that dreck to the surface and smear it visibly on them.

Sam is now presented as Cady's original defense attorney, not a passerby who witnessed the rape Cady committed. Repelled by his client's crime, Sam had buried new evidence that might have helped Cady, evidence that showed his rape victim had slept with three different men that same month. Cady learns of Sam's suppression while in prison, and is convinced that the girl would have looked like a slut who was "asking for it"—the essence of Diane Taylor's fear in the first version. Sam violated his own professional ethical duty to his client, and to Max Cady's dualized imagination, Sam's ethical lapse more than justifies his own revenge. But the first vengeance he takes is not directed at Sam, but at one of Sam's women. The "Diane Taylor" figure here is not a stranger from another town, but Sam's secretary Lori Davis, his mistress, who also becomes the first focus of Cady's mirror-staged battle to the death with Sam.

Lori (Illeana Douglas) is Sam's legal secretary. In a bar, she casually picks up Max Cady who is, of course, not there quite by chance. Lori is looking for fun, but not the cheap-thrill kind that Diane Taylor was after in Thompson's film. It is not the fleeting titillation of naughty behavior before she returns home to being

"someone's daughter" in some other town that Lori wants. Indeed, Lori mentions no father, and makes no effort to inflate or deflate her social status as Diane did. Family name and social rank play no part and Lori is not just being somewhat naughty. She is frankly looking for sex. Her bantering with Cady is aimed at this end as efficiently as possible, short of an open declaration.

This is, after all, the 1990s and Lori has been around the block a time or two. Trumping patriarchal limits is something women have long since accomplished, and if Lori does not tell this Cady about having been a small-town "queen" like Diane did hers, she also makes it very clear that she has no pretensions to being a "good" girl. She boasts a bit about her sexual past, indicating to Cady that she hasn't had "a whole busload" of lovers, a backhand way of letting him know that she's game for sex.

Lori is not out for a good time but only for a *better* time than she has been having with the hypocritical Sam. Partly out of fear of Cady, Sam has, just that day, decided to dump Lori. Her motivation in seeking out Cady is not that of Miss Taylor, who was trying to wriggle out from under patriarchy's limits (and who was rounded up and sent back to its shelter/prison for her transgressions). Lori's desire is simply to let go—let go of her painful present, let go of her painful past—to let jouissance wash over her. She not only wants to enjoy freely a night with someone, but with someone who at least—*at last*—tells her *the truth*, unlike her faithless lover, Sam. Cady is truthful indeed. He tells Lori right out that he has just been released from prison (though he does fudge a bit on the nature of his crime). It is the honesty of this confession that hooks Lori, whose response to his admission is to joke about the man who comes out of prison and meets a girl who asks what he was in for. When he says it was because he cut his wife up in pieces, the girl says, "So, then, you're single?"

Cady has made no effort to hide his an ex-con-ness: greasy hair, tattoos, over-muscled yard-exercise arms, and the truth he tells Lori has a few carefully fabricated additions planted. He tells Lori the things he figures would make this kind of girl (who works

for and beds a liberal lawyer) comfortable: that he was falsely accused, that he was jailed because he was a civil rights marcher taunted by a redneck racist sheriff he then attacked.[22] His white lies mean little in the overall context, however, since the truth he is about to bring to the girl fully exonerates him of falsity before the Thing: He bears and he wants to bear for her *the truth* of her being.

Lori takes Cady home and (a mark of Scorsese's keen ear for sexual "morality" today) the two end up in bed together in a lighthearted sadomasochistic mode. They make perfect halves of the anal body: her slender smooth body, his marred body looking like the trash he constantly thrusts in everyone's face. They are going to play at pain and thus "help Lori" forget her (rather superficial) heartache. Lori, handcuffed to the bed, roaring drunk, full of exuberance, whoops and laughs as Cady climbs on top of her. She obviously expects him to honor the contractual safeguards (the stop-words) which are the standard contract of this kind of consensual sadomasochistic casual encounter (see J. F. MacCannell 2000, pp. 37–56). But where Mitchum's Cady simulated a sexual prelude whose real violence was screened off from our view, De Niro's Cady performs his operation of "truth" onscreen. As Lori playfully struggles against his restraint of her, he bends his head over hers and takes his little bite of the real: on camera he rips off a hunk of Lori's cheek with his teeth—and spits it out. The camera withdraws through the window shades, not to elide his attack this time but to enhance it with the visual sense that we are privy to the truth of fantasy. In silhouette we witness the repeated blows Cady rains down upon the tied-up girl. If the first Cady's assault on his date shocked us, the second Cady's viscerally terrifies us, solid citizens in our seats and as far from cannibalism as possible—we think. It frightens us, I believe, precisely because Scorsese refuses to "cut" the moment of violence. With Scorsese's Cady we

22. Dean MacCannell has pointed out to me that even in his lie Cady is "truthful" to the extent that he admits transgressing local "laws" with his protest.

are neither for nor against the Law; we looking in the face of its absolute absence, in a space of what is pictured as *the unmediated real*. There is no paternal metaphor to temper the violent relation of one sexed body to an Other; there is only jouissance unchecked by the Other's response. And this jouissance of the body of the Other is definitely not a sign of Love (Lacan 1998, p. 4).

## FROM THE OBSCENE TO THE SADISTIC SUPEREGO

As the aesthetic and the perverse combine in Scorsese's film, we glimpse the postmodern, Superego-driven subject rushing to avoid the conflict between the Symbolic and the Real that makes the Law—and thereby losing the Law's protection to its mere (mirror) image. Scorsese's election of a neocannibal mode to depict Cady shades him with the force of the Kleinian *sadistic* superego, a sadism notoriously theatrical. The director has made the Real into nothing more than a visual rendering. The Real, put on stage, is tamed, imaginary, possible, not impossible. As imaginary, it offers no real thrust and thus no real incentive for the labor to fend it off. It is Scorsese's dismissal of the Real as a stage effect that makes his film seem less a morality fable than Thompson's, and more an allegory of the Reagan-Bush era, whose end the film's appearance coincides with. This was the era where even the suspicion of horror (war, treason, dead bodies, sadomasochistic sex in the White House) was glossed over and given a good, thick coating of "spin." The '80s impeached "society" as being found wanting; it skeptically questioned its claims to symbolic dimensionality; and it eschewed any depth beyond appearance to the "Imaginary" couplings of its mirror-staged lives. The anorexic '80s, with its accent on extreme thinness, were the high moment of "cannibal capitalism" whose assumption was "eat or be eaten," as in the saying, "you can never be too thin or too rich" (see D. MacCannell 1992). Thin is imaginary camouflage, coding its bearer as "unappetizing." Such feints at the level of the image are no match for the wiliness of the appetites of Drive, however, a lesson the permanently disfigured

Lori learns to her horror. Without a Symbolic antiweight (Lacan's term), savage Drive gets fully projected, Max Cady-like—projected as his body, and projected onto any other body he encounters, like Lori's.

To compare the two versions of *Cape Fear,* separated by nearly thirty years, is to discover in the one the dialectic of the two fathers, and in the second, a postmodern effort to sublate this dialectic.[23] One is all shadow and light: shadow of the Real causing the illusion of Symbolic light and hence of depth; the other, even illumination that disavows the mirage of depth and replaces it with "THE TRUTH"—the anal truth of the Imaginary.

To compare the two versions is also to see that both equally fail the *female subject.* In the Thompson, she remains the father's exclusive possession; in the Scorsese, she is an object lodged forever in the anus of the Superego, who imaginarily displaces the father who repressed her—symbolically. She can't win.

Perhaps a third version of the film will finally get it "right" for her.

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23. "Two forms of transgression beyond the limits normally assigned to the pleasure principle. . . . The excessive sublimation of the object, and what is commonly called perversion . . . are both a certain relation of desire which draws our attention upon the possibility of formulating, in the form of a question, another principle of another . . . morality, opposed to the reality principle" (Lacan 1992, p. 109).

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# 4

# *Beauty's Eye: Erotic Masques of the Death Drive in* Eyes Wide Shut

MARK PIZZATO

E. L. Doctorow's recent novel, *City of God*, contains a passage that fancifully describes film as an alien creature taking over our culture, possessing our minds and society.

> Movies are a malign life form that came to earth a hundred or so years ago and have gradually come to dominate not only our feelings but our thoughts, our intellects. They are feeding on us, having first forced us to invent them and provide them with the materiality of their existence, which is film or, latterly, tape . . . having the same desire to suck us up into themselves as a tapeworm in our guts, one planetary tapeworm living in the guts of the earth, using up the cities, the countryside, the seas, and the mountains. [2000, p. 190]

Here film itself becomes a manifestation of the death drive in human culture, an apparently alien force, reproducing through us and "feeding" on us, by perversely replacing us with dramatic fictions. The alienating monster of film—as imaginary, substitutive language—repulses, yet attracts us, by reenacting the primal alienation

of being that we each experienced, according to Lacan, in our early years as we gained entry to the symbolic and its mirroring misrecognitions.[1]

However, we know (like Doctorow) that film did not come to earth a century ago from another planet. In many centuries prior to the invention of film, live theatre evoked similar demonic fears from its detractors—even if film and television "dominate" more feelings, thoughts, and intellects through their mass audiences today. Antitheatrical theorists—from Plato to Augustine, to the Puritans (who closed London's theatres shortly after Shakespeare), to Rousseau in the Enlightenment, to recent protestors of gay plays—all shared a fear that theatre stimulated perverse desires in vulnerable spectators. Yet their critiques also attest to the power of theatre in representing social and psychological conflicts, beyond accepted norms or religious and philosophical ideals. Both cinema and theatre threaten to expose violent, rebellious, immoral energies by showing current ideals and norms as masks that can be changed, overturned, or reshaped. Theatre and film may function as safety valves to contain rebellion through fictional expressions of perversity. Yet they also put their audiences in touch with a seemingly alien force, "a tapeworm in our guts," an erotic and deadly drive, behind the beautiful ideals onstage or onscreen and in the Real of the spectator and society.

In Aristotle's *Poetics* there is an ancient theory about drama's monstrous appeal that still applies to the hypertheatre[2] of post-

1. On Lacan's theory of alienation as the sacrifice of being (and jouissance), see Fink (1995, pp. 49–54, 60). See also Fink (1997, pp. 209–210), on the "subject as drive"—dominated by the imaginary Other's demand in primal alienation, then by the symbolic Other's desire in separation, and finally coming into its own as real, through the Lacanian cure.

2. "Hypertheatre" is a term of my own coining, which refers to the postmodern proliferation of theatres in various media and the corresponding reflexivity of performance texts. The hypertheatre of various screen media has supplanted the mass popularity of live theatre a century or more ago—like the loss of the real in Baudrillard's (1983, pp. 38, 53) theory of the postmodern "hyperreal."

modern media, dominating our feelings and thoughts, with perverse or moral effects. Aristotle locates the mimetic drive of theatre in child's play—in the pleasure of taking on others' roles—and in the joy of learning from artful display, even of "the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies" (Dukore 1974, p. 34). The theatre of the family and its oedipal drama, at least from a Freudian perspective, involves the learning of identity through playing different roles, and watching others do so, with reactions from the Other (parents and society) forming the ego's rights and wrongs.[3] But Lacan's (1977, p. 4) "drama" of the mirror stage further elucidates Aristotle's idea of theatre's sources. The 6- to 18-month-old infant can be observed finding the joy of its whole form (*Gestalt*) in the mirror—and in the (m)Other's desires. This early development of the infant's ego exemplifies the mask of a whole identity that substitutes for the (illusion of) lost symbiosis with the mother and marks the infant's separation from, yet oedipal desire of returning to, her. The beautiful, whole ego playing in the mirror also masks a hole in the infant as spectator of itself: its lacking being, manifested "by a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism" and in dreams and fantasies of the "fragmented body."[4]

Aristotle's sources and effects of theatre relate directly to Lacan's theories of the mirror stage and cathartic cure—as applied to stage and screen illusions of beauty. Children and adults play at becoming whole selves, through the Other's desires, especially through the mirror-stage rites of today's mass media screens. TV and film express the desires of the Other beyond the home, with

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3. The pleasures of theatre and child's play seem to involve a freedom to take on many different roles. Yet they also show that the subject eventually becomes trapped in certain ego illusions, compulsively repeating the sacrifice of self to Other, even while not allowing the Other to enjoy one's sacrifice. See Fink (1997, p. 69). According to my interpretation of Aristotle, tragedy can free the spectator from repetitive sacrifice, like Lacanian treatment, only through the crossing of fantasy in catharsis—not by a regression to fantasy and childlike imitation. See Pizzato (2004).

4. See Lacan (1977, pp. 2–3), on the *Gestalt* in the mirror (stage) in relation to "the meaning of beauty."

the mimetic drive of child's play feeding into the ego mirrors of commercial consumerism. Yet, stage and screen representations of ideal, beautiful egos—whether as mimetic identifications or as oedipal objects for erotic possession—also signify the hollowness of the mask and the loss of self in the lure of maternal symbiosis.[5] As Aristotle and Lacan point out, ignoble animals and dead bodies can provide a learning pleasure, because they present a shared sense of the fragmented body, as fantasy fear and Real death drive, within each spectator. More often, however, the ego's "mediatization through the desire of the other" (Lacan 1977, p. 5) produces mimetic repetitions from various media theatres to life: the imitation of fetishized characters (or stars) and their plots, which often involve melodramatic justifications for violence against certain types identified as evil.

One sense of Aristotelian catharsis, supported by most screen drama and American ego psychology, involves stereotyped imitations in the audience and society, building the "moral" ego to conform to certain norms, by expressing yet purging the perverse desires and fears of spectators and patients. This melodramatic sense of catharsis would seem to celebrate ego freedom, showing the good violence of the hero triumphing over the evil villain. Yet a conventionally moral catharsis demands the sacrifice of personal desires for the sake of ego conformity and projects the evil designation on certain types in real life, through stereotypic villains who do not obey the communal rule. A more radical sense of tragic catharsis would sacrifice this very sacrifice of guilty communal conformity. It would traverse the fundamental fantasy of heroic ego to show split-subjectivity, both good and evil, in the protagonist and in the Other as lacking being (with both the hero and opponent as admirable, yet flawed). Such an ethical, not just moral, catharsis was defined by Lacan himself in his *Seminar VII* (1992,

5. See Lacan (1992, p. 196) on the hollowness of beautiful, religious images and of man as made in God's image, with God's power "in the capacity to advance into emptiness."

p. 323) (see also Žižek 1991, pp. 138–139). It draws the spectator beyond the limits of fear and pity, thus purifying desire in relation to the symptomatic drives of the tragic subject. The *hamartia* (repeated error in judgment) that brings about the hero's downfall, according to Aristotle, becomes clarified as Lacanian *sinthome*: "a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment . . . the only point that gives consistency to the subject" (Žižek 1989, p. 75). The spectator may then experience, to some degree, an identification with the tragic *sinthome* onscreen, as in Lacan's definition of the psychoanalytic cure: "The analysis achieves its end when the patient is able to recognize, in the Real of his symptom, the only support of his being" (Žižek 1989, p. 75). One can glimpse this possibility at certain moments of *Eyes Wide Shut*, a postmodern, erotic tragedy (not just a melodramatic "thriller"), although the particular experience for each spectator may vary greatly.

Kubrick's final film exposes the lure of beauty as bearing a death drive in the eye of the beholder, implicating the audience, male and female, in its rite of sacrifice. *Eyes* derives from a short novel with multiple locations, published 70 years earlier by the novelist and playwright Arthur Schnitzler. Kubrick's film moves the story's setting from Vienna to New York, from the early to the late 1900s (although critics have questioned the reality of the film's setting).[6] It also erases the original *Traumnovelle*'s hints of ethnic Jewishness and anti-Semitism. According to *Eyes* screenwriter Frederic Raphael, Kubrick "wanted Fridolin [the novel's main character] to be a Harrison Fordish goy [with the name Harford], and he forbade any reference to Jews. . . . His main motive was, I am pretty sure, the wish not to alienate his audience" (1999a, pp. 43–44).[7] However, Kubrick alienates his audience in another way by evoking, yet frustrating, the conventional male gaze. *Eyes* questions the mimetic drive of the movie theatre to idealize beauty and seduce

6. See Decter (1999). She perceives the film as set in the mid-'70s, but finds details that do not fit that time, or the present. For an even more sarcastic questioning of the film's narrative setting, see Gelman-Waxner (1999).

7. For a slightly different version, see Raphael (1999b, p. 59).

the spectator, unmasking the usual romantic fantasy onscreen, which pretends to resolve the lack in erotic being.

Specific stagings of desire in *Eyes* point beyond the Foucauldian notion of the spectator's patriarchal, panoptic "gaze," developed by feminist film theory in the 1970s. They show instead a different sense of the gaze as coming from uncanny objects of beauty onscreen, like the two-dimensional skull that Lacan analyzed in Holbein's painting, *The Ambassadors* (1978, pp. 88–89, 92).[8] Such a challenge to the viewer's look occurs in certain paintings and in distinctive moments of stage and screen drama that offer a glimpse of the Real, of the lacking being and death drive in the spectator, beyond the controlling pleasures of voyeurism. Kubrick's film presents a newly Lacanian challenge to the current, mass media simulacrum: luring the spectator into a dreamlike odyssey of female fantasy and male perversity, through the mysteries of the *femme fatale* and primal, obscene father(s).

Prior to *Eyes*, many Kubrick films challenged audiences with past or present perversion and violence (*Lolita*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Shining*, *Full Metal Jacket*) and present or future technologies (*Dr. Strangelove*, *2001*). But his final, postmortem work, with a story moved from past to present, focuses the erotic eye of masculine desire toward the feminine drive of an Other jouissance: from Imaginary visions and Symbolic rites to Real mortalities. This implicates not only the viewer, but also the cinematic apparatus itself, possessing the spectator through the self-alienating jouissance within the audience's desire for beauty onscreen. Kubrick's *Eyes* presents the perverse side of cinema's spectacular, pleasurable beauty, with masked obscene fathers sacrificing the hero as a voyeur onscreen, and thus implicating the viewer in the movie "house" as well.

*Eyes* begins by immediately evoking the erotic stare of the viewer. (Even prior to the film's premiere, the rumors of its per-

8. For more on the distinction between the Foucauldian panoptic gaze in film theory and Lacan's sense of the gaze, see Copjec (1994, pp. 16–19, 36–38). See also Žižek (1992, pp. 15, 126–127).

versity set up that stare as well.) During the initial credits, Kubrick shows a quick shot of Nicole Kidman's bare back, ass, and legs, as she drops a black dress off her shoulders to the floor, between "A film by STANLEY KUBRICK" and the film's title. Tom Cruise then gives his first line as Dr. Bill Harford (with Kidman, his wife when the film was made and first released, as the character's wife, Alice): "Honey, have you seen my wallet?" Thus, the film presents the arousal, yet insecurity, of the male gaze—in its dependence on the erotic beauty and symbolic knowledge of the woman to bolster the hollow ego and repair its loss of identity. Of course, female egos and some males in the audience might also associate themselves with the wife's beauty and vulnerability in this opening scene, as Bill pressures Alice (after she tells him where his wallet is) to hurry because they are running late for the party. Indeed, Kubrick gives an unusually frank shot of the star actress on the toilet, rising as her husband enters and wiping herself once before putting her dress back on. The contrast between the initial display of Kidman's naked beauty in the credits and this shot of her vulnerability, between toilet demands and husband's urgency, brings the audience into a primal scene of bedroom and bathroom relations (as these parents prepare to leave their daughter with a sitter), challenging the cinematic voyeur's safe distance from the screen.

Various film critics have attacked Kubrick's final film with relish.[9] But their inability to identify with the characters, and their disappointment with the film's erotic scenes, may show a refusal to take on the challenge that Kubrick poses to the cinematic apparatus and its traditional voyeuristic spectator. Cruise as the protagonist does become somewhat foolish (unlike the macho roles he usually plays) in Bill's neurotic quest to join the perverse players at the orgy. Bill's eventual unmasking by the patriarchs at the

9. See Decter's comment that "Kubrick clearly neither knew nor cared who any of the characters in this movie really is," and that the orgy scene is "utterly aestheticized and unerotic" (1999, p. 53). Or Gelman-Waxner, who complains that the actors "take at least 30 seconds between each syllable and constantly repeat the line they've just heard" (1999, p. 49).

strangely formal orgy also threatens to catch the film viewers as voyeurs like Bill. But this is precisely how Kubrick's final film explores a tragic dimension, against the grain of its "erotic thriller" genre: through Bill's encounter with the death drive in feminine beauty and in the obscene father's desires, as profoundly troubling, not merely exciting, in relation to his own *sinthome* of erotic mortality.

As a doctor, Bill Harford has had many opportunities to examine the female body in intimate ways (as shown in the film with his women patients). But he has become complacent about his wife's beauty, as Kubrick reveals while they prepare in their New York City home to go to a Christmas party. Alice asks her husband how her hair looks; he responds automatically with "beautiful"—not even looking at her, as she then complains. The non-stare of the husband (both Bill Harford and Tom Cruise) thus contrasts with the erotic and intimate looks already given to the viewer. However, Victor Ziegler (Sydney Pollack), Bill's wealthy patient and host of the Christmas party, admires Alice with a direct stare and statement when they meet at his door: "Alice, look at you. My God, you're absolutely stunning. And I don't say that to all the women." While briefly separated at the party, Bill and Alice enjoy their attractiveness to others: Bill with two young models, who flirt with him, and Alice with a charming, white-haired Hungarian, who dances with her and tries to lure her to a more private room. Although enjoying his attention (with the help of champagne), Alice insists on remaining loyal to her husband.[10] Yet this meeting sets up her subsequent erotic memory and dream, which will greatly trouble her husband. His encounter with the two models, building up his male ego in the Christmas party's elegant music and white lights, is only the beginning of his odyssey beyond such a transcendent, romantic masque toward a new sense of the body's mortality: with beauty's ecstasy masking and revealing the death drive.

10. See Nelson (2000, p. 277). Nelson sees Ziegler and the Hungarian as representing "an aging male order" in contrast to Bill and Alice, as Yuppie Hunk and New Woman of the 1990s.

The hero's erotic fantasies are stimulated by the two models, as they walk with him toward "where the rainbow ends" (as one of the models says). But Kubrick interrupts the viewer's personal associations and further fantasies as the doctor is called away to help his wealthy host. In a very large bathroom, Bill is asked by the shirtless Ziegler to treat a girl who lies naked on a chair, in a stupor after a heroin and cocaine overdose. Bill saves her life and saves the rich man's "ass" (as Ziegler says, thanking the doctor). Yet this crucial character, "Mandy," not found in the original novel like Ziegler and the bathroom scene, will appear again and again in the film, to show the hero and the viewer her beautiful, nude body as a mask of the death drive. Through the obscene desires of the ultrawealthy, mimicked by the doctor, she becomes both an erotic lure of transcendent power and a reminder of mortal vulnerability.

In his Lacanian view of *film noir* and hard-boiled detective novels, Slavoj Žižek states: "The *femme fatale* and obscene-knowing father cannot appear simultaneously, within the same narrative space" (1992, p. 160).[11] But Kubrick's *Eyes* breaks that rule to some degree. It offers Ziegler, along with his colleagues in the later orgy scene, as primal, obscene father(s). And the film presents Mandy, along with other beautiful women in various scenes, as fatal to themselves in their erotic death drives and potentially to the hero as well. In saving Mandy from the brink of death, and saving the rich, obscene father from embarrassment in his erotic bathroom, Bill sets up a debt that they both will repay in ways that profoundly trouble the hero (and film spectator) in his subsequent voyeuristic journey. Lacanian analyst Paul Verhaeghe has argued, regarding Freud's journey from *Totem and Taboo* to *Moses and Monotheism*: "Freud will deconstruct the myth [of the primal father] and discover that it is the subject . . . who installs the father as a defence against the threatening Real that he fears from the mother"

11. Žižek explains: "As long as the obscene-knowing father is still present, the woman is not yet fatal, she remains an *object of exchange* between father and son"—although he offers an exception with Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key* (1992, p. 160). See also Žižek (2001, pp. 174–75).

(1995, p. 46). The obscene father of personal prehistory is not a primordial villain, but a projection of one's own perverse desires. It is my argument that Kubrick's hero makes a similar discovery and that the cathartic spectator joins him in the deconstruction of the cinematic father's obscene enjoyment—facing the Real of the death drive in oneself, as well as primal fears of the (m)Other.

After the tipsy Alice turns down the Hungarian's offer, she is shown admiring her own upper body in the mirror at home. Then her husband, also shown as naked from the waist up, enters the mirror's frame, caresses her breast, and kisses her. She takes off her glasses and kisses him, but then turns aside to the mirror with another stare, as the camera closes in on her face. (This image became the poster for the film.) Alice's errant look, despite her loyalty at the party, signifies an Other jouissance beyond the love for her husband, which is developed further in Kubrick's film. After various scenes of Bill at work the next day (including his examination of the breasts of a beautiful woman) and Alice at home, putting on a bra and wrapping presents with their daughter, the couple relaxes in bed that evening in their underwear, smoking a joint together. They talk about the party the previous night and the people they each found themselves flirting with. Then they start to argue about whether women have errant, erotic desires like men, beyond "security and commitment." Bill thinks they do not; Alice tells him and the male gaze of the audience: "If you men only knew."[12] Bill realizes that Alice wants him to be jealous of her and the Hungarian. But he insists that he knows she would never be unfaithful to him: "because you're my wife . . . [and] the mother of my child." His confidence in her pushes her to reveal a perverse side to their erotic life, undermining his certainty of her loyalty as wife and mother, in order to get him to value her in another way. Yet this threatens Bill's connection to Alice and to his own daugh-

12. The wife, Albertina, says a similar thing to her husband, Fridolin, in the original novel (Schnitzler 1990, p. 15). See Rasmussen (2001, p. 331), on the differences between Fridolin and Bill.

ter, exposing his dependence on the (m)Other's desire and triggering his odyssey of revenge.

Alice tells her husband about a man in a naval uniform whom she saw last year, while they were on a family vacation. With just "a glance" from him, she "could hardly move." When she made love with Bill that afternoon, the naval officer was in her mind the whole time. She now says that if that man wanted her for only one moment, she would give up everything: Bill, their daughter, and their entire future together. Such a fantasy appears not to be "beyond the phallus," since it involves another man. Yet it actually shows a feminine jouissance beyond the need for either man—beyond the patriarchal orders of romance, husband, and family. Alice confesses that she is willing to sacrifice herself as mother and wife, to destroy her world, through a different erotic desire and its death drive. Like those in the audience sympathizing with his male gaze and its sudden deconstruction, Bill is shocked at this immoral passion in the "mother of my child." It may have been just a fantasy, but by confessing it, Alice has raised the stakes of their marriage—already sacrificing her husband's illusion of her loyalty and maternal stability. The mask of his ego in the mirror of their married love, as shown in the mirror onscreen a bit earlier, has been profoundly disturbed by her new honesty and her blinding beauty beyond his patriarchal control.[13]

Alice shocks her husband with a fantasy from the past that still lives in her head—that she plays with, beyond his presence, even when they are making love, as in the earlier mirror scene. But she also shocks the film audience, especially its male gaze, with her Other look and confession of passion—her tragic, Dionysian, liberating yet destructive jouissance. Bill is immediately called away (as in the novel, where the wife's revelation is much less intense)[14] to go to the house where a longtime patient of his has just died. An

13. See Lacan (1992, pp. 281, 295) on Antigone's blinding beauty.

14. See Schnitzler (1990, pp. 8–10). There Fridolin also confesses that he fantasized about another woman, a young girl he saw on the same seashore vacation in Denmark.

erotic and death-driven passion meets him there as well. As he speaks with the daughter of the dead man, sitting next to the corpse in its bed, she suddenly confesses her love for him, kissing Bill passionately—after discussing the loss of her father and her plans to marry her boyfriend and move away from New York soon. In a flood of emotion, she says she does not want to move, that she loves the doctor, that she wants to live near him even if she never sees him again. But then her boyfriend arrives at the dead man's bedside and the doctor leaves.

After he bumps into a group of boisterous young men, who view him as gay and taunt him about that, Bill also meets a prostitute who invites him into her home. He discusses her fee and kisses her, but his wife's call on his cell phone interrupts their erotic encounter. Bill decides to leave without having sex, yet pays her anyway. (In a later scene he will learn that the hooker, Domino, is HIV-positive.) En route to these close calls with erotic passion and the death drive—while sitting in a taxi going to the home of the dead man and his daughter, while walking on the street before meeting the gang of young men and then the prostitute—Bill fantasizes about his wife and the naval officer. Alice and the other man are shown in black and white onscreen making passionate love, as Bill's imagination is haunted by her confession of desire. These meetings and fantasies prepare Bill to desire a more perverse experience, in revenge against his wife's Other jouissance, when he is told about a mysterious orgy by his pianist friend, Nick Nightingale. However, on the way to the orgy, trying to get the right costume (a cloak and mask) to gain admission to that Other theatre, Bill stumbles upon another place of obscene play.

At the closed costume shop, Bill wakes the owner, Mr. Milich (Rade Sherbedgia), out of bed, but bribes him to open the shop. The Slavic Milich shows Bill many manikins with period costumes—"looks like life," he says—and also shows the doctor his bald spot, asking for his help. Yet this is not the only hypertheatre in the costume shop, where manikins seem alive and the owner/director reveals a sign of mortality on the top of his head. After Bill

declines to help Milich with his hair loss and Kubrick's camera jumps 180 degrees to the other side of them, the costumer discovers the remnants of Chinese food on a coffee table and lingerie on a couch in another part of the shop, behind a large glass wall and door. Milich then finds two men and his own teenage daughter hiding in their underwear behind a clothes rack and a couch. (The men also have wigs on.) As paternal superego, he quickly closes the sexual scene. He tells his daughter (as "little whore") to go to bed and that he will "kill" her for this indiscretion, while locking the two men inside the glass display room as a "police matter." But the daughter (Leelee Sobieski) smiles while holding onto Bill as a shield against her father's wrath, and whispers something in his ear that the cinema audience does not hear, before she leaves as the father commanded.

Later in the film (after the orgy), when Bill returns his costume to the shop, he again meets the daughter of the owner and the two men who were playing with her. But the men leave in gentlemanly agreement with the owner and Bill is offered the daughter if he desires her, presumably for an extra price like the after-hours costume. The theatre of the two costume shop scenes, with the daughter's mysterious whisper and the owner's change of attitude toward her erotic play, thus frames and reflects the orgy rite at the center of the film. The masked men enjoying their ritual prostitutes at the mansion and the owner prostituting his daughter in the costume shop both reveal the *père-verse* father—not as an alien villain, but as the inherent obscenity within ordinary laws of business and class control.

En route to the orgy, Bill again fantasizes about his wife with the naval officer, and the film spectator sees more lovemaking in black and white. But the Other jouissance of Alice's own fantasy is still out of reach for Bill, like the whisper of the costumer's daughter to the movie viewer. The Real of female desire in both cases, along with the beauty of the actors and perverse twists of the plot, lures the hero and spectator toward further speculations and personal fantasies, in the mirrors and theatres onscreen. And yet,

Kubrick's film, unlike most cinema, eventually takes the viewer too far—beyond voyeuristic pleasure—toward a more disturbing jouissance at the symbolic and imaginary edges of the Real.

While heading for the exclusive mansion and its orgy, Bill and his sympathetic audience follow the perverse desires of the Other in various forms: not just his wife's confession of disloyalty in fantasy, or the erotic play of the costumer's daughter, but more specifically the desire of Nick Nightingale, Bill's friend from medical school, to see more of the orgy's beautiful women, beyond the blindfold he is required to wear while playing the keyboard there. Bill wears the mask and costume that Nick told him was needed to enter that hypertheatre of ultra–high-class perversity and speaks the password that Nick gave him: "Fidelio."[15] Once inside, he and the film audience see what at first appears to be a monastic ritual: a crowd of people in black cloaks, hoods, and various masks, in a large mosquelike room, watch an inner circle of figures similarly dressed and a red-cloaked leader in a gold mask, waving a censer at each of these acolytes, like a high priest. In the original novel, the people in the room are "dressed as monks and nuns" (1990, p. 72). But in Kubrick's film, the figures of the inner circle wear hooded cloaks like the audience around them, until the red-cloaked leader pounds his staff on the floor. The figures drop their cloaks and reveal that they are women, now wearing nothing but black thong underpants, high-heeled shoes, black choke collars, and various masks.[16]

However, these women are costumed in their nudity, displaying their nakedness as ideal beauty under the cloaks, with the masks as part of that costume. The anonymity of the mask shifts the focus of each woman's beauty toward the body, as matching current imaginary ideals, yet also revealing the arbitrariness of erotic signifiers as illusions of health and immortality. The Real of each

15. In Schnitzler's novel the password is "Denmark" (which is also where the doctor's wife saw her fantasy man), not "Fidelio" (1990, pp. 8, 72).

16. In Schnitzler's novel, the doctor also sees naked "nuns" wearing only masks and veils (1990, p. 75).

female body in the circle is still hidden, despite or through the lack of clothing. Their personalities are only shown, if at all, through the choice of mask (and perhaps hair color and style). As the censer of the priest-leader moves around the circle of kneeling, naked women, they perform a ritual gesture in pairs: each touches the shoulder of the other next to her, bending toward her until the lips of their masks almost meet. Meanwhile, two cloaked and hooded figures in commedia masks on a balcony above Bill look down at him and his mask. Their eyes stare at him from behind the masks; they nod, as does he. Then the women in the circle are sent away, each in turn, by the leader's staff hitting the floor near them. Each woman goes to a man in the black-cloaked audience and again performs the kissing gesture with her mask and his. Such carefully performed rites and repeated gestures (with the soundtrack's Latin-sounding chants and organ music) suggest something like a black mass, but with a perverse mystery of unclear meaning and identity.[17]

In its Brechtian social gests, the scene might alienate the film spectator into considering the arbitrariness of erotic love and current ideals of beauty—showing the women as objects of possession, yet also lures of ritual submission, between the cloaked, patriarchal participants. But the rite bears an Artaudian sense of cruelty as well—in the leader's pounding of his staff to send off each woman and in the choice (or Kafka-esque assignment) of her cloaked companion. When Bill gets "kissed" and led away by one of them, the aura of cruelty intensifies as she tells him (like her counterpart in the novel) that he does not belong and that he must leave before it is "too late" (1990, p. 78). That woman is led away by another cloaked figure, and the voyeuristic pleasures return, for

17. There is no ritual with a censer or staff in Schnitzler's novel, but there is a similar effect of sadistic mystery when the hero sees the naked, masked nuns: "He realized that each of these women would forever be a mystery, and that the enigma of their large eyes peering at him from beneath the black masks would remain unsolved. The delight of beholding was changed to an almost unbearable agony of desire" (1990, pp. 75–76). Schnitzler's men, however, suddenly change from cassocked monks to colorful courtiers, and the women "receive them with wild and wicked laughter" (1990, p. 76), very unlike the film.

Bill and the film viewer, as he walks through various mansion rooms where naked, masked participants perform sexual acts in different positions. (The hard-core angles were blocked for the film's American release by computer-added figures to save it from an "NC-17" rating.) Such teasing of the eye increases when a masked woman without a thong walks up to Bill and asks if he is enjoying himself. But then the first woman (now also without a thong) takes him aside and reminds him that he must leave, that he is in danger. Bill holds her hands, yet she refuses to tell him her name, to let him take off her mask, or to go away with him: "because it could cost me my life, and possibly yours." The Artaudian cruelty climaxes when a large, masked butler takes Bill back to the initial ritual room.

With a cloaked crowd gathered there, Bill is asked for a further password, beyond the initial signifier he had correctly given before. When he fails to demonstrate his symbolic access this time, he is ordered by the red-cloaked leader to remove his mask. A similar dialogue is given in the novel, but Kubrick offers a slow pan of various masks (some commedia-like, others more modern and abstract) in the audience around the new rite—appearing as horribly distorted, silently mocking, judgmental faces surrounding Bill. These masks, with that of the leader now sitting on a throne and of the two assistants standing beside him, are symbols of the panoptic power in the eyes of the beholders, and thus reflect the anonymous, male gaze of the cinema audience. When he is forced to reveal his face, Bill is made more naked than the women who wear no clothes in the mansion's other rooms. However, the film audience might first see the famous face of Tom Cruise as his character removes the mask. Kubrick's film thus highlights the ego masks of symbolic and imaginary identity, of star name and fictional character, in the cinematic apparatus. But through the plot twists of the orgy scenes, he reframes the conventional, voyeuristic gaze: encouraging sympathy with its victims as well as identification with its power.

The pleasure yet fear of the film audience, at the Real side of the screen, is reflected in the voyeur being caught—after he has led the film camera and its spectators through the various orgy

rooms. The red-cloaked and gold-masked leader commands a further gesture of punishment: asking that Bill remove his clothes as well as his mask, "or would you like us to remove them for you?" This response by the primal, obscene father to Bill's mimicry of the guests, as invited orgy spectator, also challenges the power of those in the film audience who identify with Bill's tragic flaw (and *sinthome*) of erotic curiosity fueled by marital revenge. In a sense, the cinema spectator is being commanded, too, to unmask and undress—to lose the voyeuristic anonymity of the fourth wall view and its cloak of invisibility to the scene onscreen. The audience is not directly addressed here by a character onscreen, which would only emphasize the different diegesis of actor and spectator worlds. But the audience as Other, as Oudart's "Absent One" (see Heath 1981, p. 92), is unsutured now as lacking, as tragically flawed, not immortally aloof—while identifying with the hero's subjectivity, split by the father's two rites. Bill, like the film viewer, was a participant in the male gaze of the ritual orgy, though as impostor. He now becomes the scapegoat and dupe in a further ritual sacrifice.

The cinematic apparatus always contains ritual aspects and theatrical limits, through its patriarchal, proscenium superego that offers some views and closes off others, not only at the edges of the screen, but also within it (as with the computer-added, cloaked and naked figures as masks over the sex acts in the American version of *Eyes*). The cinematic superego, as ego ideal, allows for the legal enjoyment of the scene onscreen, yet also demands a certain sacrifice—of money, time, and imagination—from the spectator. However, *Eyes* pushes the spectator toward a more disturbing sacrifice of that conventional, comfortably repeated, voyeuristic offering: a "sacrifice of the sacrifice," as in the tragic catharsis of the Lacanian cure (see Žižek 1992, p. 59; see also Fink 1997, pp. 69–71). This exposes the Real of the death drive behind the erotic mask of beauty onscreen and within the voyeuristic pleasures of the male gaze. The spectator is faced with the problem of identifying either with the obscene fathers, taking sadistic pleasure in the sacrificial stripping, or with Bill as the voyeur who becomes a scapegoat. Either way, the viewer's normal illusion of power in the fourth wall

and ritual submission to the screen becomes cruelly disturbed, and thus cathartically clarified, at least for the moment, until another scapegoat arrives.

The demand that Tom Cruise remove his clothes—in relation to Nicole Kidman's undressing in other parts of the film—might also be taken as a critical Brechtian gest, reminding the audience of the pressures on female stars to undress fully onscreen, while male stars rarely do. However, the tension—raised by the homoerotic gaze of masked men demanding that a male star strip[18]—is broken by another offering that returns the viewer to a more heterosexual sacrifice. The beautiful, naked, mystery Woman appears on a balcony above and says, "Stop." She now wears a black thong as well as her mask, but still submits her nudity (as a non-star)—and something more—to save Bill from punishment. "I am ready to redeem him," she shouts. (Her voice is remarkably clear and strong despite the mask covering her mouth.) The leader of the rite accepts the exchange, and she is led away by a cloaked figure in a phallic, beaklike mask. Bill asks what will happen to her, but he is only told that "no one can change her fate now" and that he must keep quiet and not inquire further or "dire consequences" will happen to him and to his family. The homoerotic shock of displaying Tom Cruise's fully nude body is thus replaced by the erotic, sacrificial view of his redeemer's naked breasts and her attendant's phallic mask. Yet the conventional male gaze is given a double, Brechtian jolt: both the potential unmasking of a star's phallic power and the use of a whore as Christ figure.

The mystery Woman becomes much more than an object of exchange, like the other women are, for erotic rituals between the perverse fathers. She wills her own "fate" at their hands, gaining a transcendent power through her willingness to be sacrificed, purifying her desire as erotic/death drive. "Let him go," she orders the men. "Take me." Christ-like, this (m)Other saves Bill's ego and body

18. Same-sex couples are also shown slow dancing in the last room Bill passes through before his inquisition.

from symbolic, imaginary, and perhaps real castration. She inverts the genders in the usual melodramatic plot of the male hero risking his life to save the female victim. Thus, as his Redeemer, she leaves him with a dilemma: restore the typical plot or be feminized as lacking, indebted survivor. Here the film tempts the audience's conventional gaze with the lure of melodrama:[19] the possibility that Bill will fight back against the villains and save or avenge the girl. But instead Kubrick keeps the focus on further, tragicomic twists and more dire consequences, showing the beautiful, yet horrific jouissance of the Woman who sacrifices her body in the gift of life. Even if the Woman only exists as lost mother, this reveals the lacking being of the subject who can never repay Her.[20]

Bill returns home, staring for a while at his sleeping daughter, and then hiding his orgy costume in a locked cabinet. Before he left, his wife had told him that her love for him was "tender and sad," even while she fantasized about betraying him and wanted to sacrifice everything for an affair with the other man she had merely glimpsed. Bill's affairs of that night have more than matched her betrayal, and he returns now to be reformed in her maternal tenderness. But he finds her laughing in her sleep—enjoying their marital bed without him. This further eruption of feminine jouissance disturbs him, so he wakes her. He curls up like a child next to her in bed, and she pets his head tenderly. But then he asks her to tell her dream. Wisely, Kubrick chooses not to show the dream,[21] focusing instead on her face and Bill's as they both react to her remem-

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19. Although "melodrama" has been applied to specific women's films of the 1940s, I use the term in the broader, theatrical sense as a dominant structure of nineteenth-century stage drama and twentieth-century film and TV, involving clear-cut heroes, victims, and villains, whose violent struggle ends in the hero's victory and apparently justified revenge.

20. See Žižek (1992, p. 169) on the "point of true horror" in *film noir*: "when the subject finds himself face to face with the groundless abyss of his lack of being"—and the "relief" that the femme fatale provides in giving the hero his fate.

21. See Raphael (1999b, p. 24), on the "overwritten dreams" of the novel and the problem of creating any credible dream on film, because real dreams "don't have a *frame*" and because dream space "isn't equally, consistently . . . *dense*."

bering and relating of the dream. They were in a foreign city, she says, both naked. She was terrified, ashamed, and angry at him, thinking it was his fault. When he left, though, she felt "wonderful . . . lying in a beautiful garden, stretched out naked in the sunlight." Her fantasy man, the naval officer, appeared and laughed at her.

Alice pauses, crying into her pillow, but Bill insists on hearing the rest of the dream. She says she made love to that man and to many others, "so many, I don't know how many I was with," wanting to make fun of her husband and laugh in his face (as she was doing when he woke her). Here Kubrick's film, like Schnitzler's novel,[22] moves beyond simple melodramatic identifications of the Woman as victim or villain. The prior scene with the femme fatale as tragic redeemer, taking the obscene fathers' punishment in place of the voyeur, gets a further, tragicomic (or *moque-comique*) twist with Alice's dream orgy and real laughter.[23] The castrative threat of the primal fathers and the ideal beauty of the femme fatale/redeemer had given new life to Bill, albeit with a certain sacrificial debt. But his wife's jouissance of dream laughter shatters the redeemer's tragic gift and Bill's apparent freedom to return home. The Woman does not exist as a mother who will save his ego; she has other desires and joys, making fun of or with him, and sacrificing him in that ambiguity.

Freud speculated that dreams were repressed wishes that had been censored so as not to wake the sleeper. Yet the erotic lures, orgies, and dreams in *Eyes* not only entice the film spectator to project and enjoy his or her own desires and fears, in the safety of the screen's fiction. They also shock the viewer toward a possible

22. The wife's dream is very different and much more complex in Schnitzler's novel, but it ends with a similar explanation of her laughter (1990, p. 113). See Nelson (2000, pp. 265–266), for further comparisons of Schnitzler's Albertina and Kubrick's Alice. Nelson also declares that Alice is "the most psychologically complete character" in all of Kubrick's films (2000, p. 296).

23. See Žižek (2000, pp. 43–44), on the "passage from *tragique* to *moque-comique*" in the postmodern: "There is a horror so deep that it can no longer be 'sublimated' into tragic dignity, and is for that reason approachable only through an eerie parodic imitation/doubling of parody itself."

cathartic awakening—across personal fantasies and imagined beauty to the Real of the drive. For the rest of the film, Bill becomes an oedipal detective, trying to save, repay, or at least reconnect with the Woman as erotic, redeeming (m)Other. But the film undermines his earnestness as would-be melodramatic hero, twisting the audience's sympathies and fears, again and again, toward tragicomic mysteries, rather than clear battles and a final triumph over evil. A gay hotel clerk flirts excessively with Bill as he inquires about his friend, Nick Nightingale. Bill learns that the pianist was taken away from the hotel, with a bruise on his face, by two large men very early in the morning after the orgy. Then Bill tries to take revenge upon his wife again by revisiting the scene of his coitus interruptus with the prostitute, Domino. He finds her female roommate there instead. He flirts with her overtly, pressing against her face and body, and unbuttoning her blouse. She at first enjoys his advances. But then she stops him and says that her roommate, Domino, has just learned she is HIV-positive. This ends the erotic meeting, disappointing the film viewer as voyeur, yet presenting the shock of the Real in Domino's mortal illness and Doctor Bill's narrow escape.

Bill encounters the death drive again, behind the ideals of beauty and the detours of desire, when he reads in the newspaper of an ex-beauty queen's drug overdose. As a doctor, he gains access to her hospital record and then to her body in the morgue. Both he and the film viewer study her naked corpse, trying to discern if she is also the masked mystery woman who saved Bill at the orgy, and if her death was the fate she exchanged for his freedom. (Kubrick did not use the same actress.)[24] Finally, in a scene added to the novel's plot by Kubrick and Raphael, Bill is called to a private meeting with Victor Ziegler. Here the death drive connecting Bill, his host at the Christmas party, and the masked beauty at the orgy is clarified, although with tragicomic ambiguity—in the admission of a theatrical lie. Ziegler says he was present at the orgy and warns Bill of the grave danger he is in now if he continues to

24. See Nelson (2000, pp. 327–328).

ask questions about it. Ziegler confirms that the mysterious woman who redeemed him there was Mandy, the one Bill saved at the Christmas party and saw dead in the morgue. But Ziegler insists that she was just a "hooker," that her warnings and the ritual redemption were "staged" as a "charade" to scare him, that nothing was done to her afterward, and that she died of her own accord as a drug addict. Ziegler even challenges the tragic ideal of the Woman's sacrifice—for Bill and sympathetic spectators—calling it a masturbatory fantasy: a "play-acted, phony sacrifice that you've been jerking yourself off with."

Ziegler gives a face to the primal, obscene father, whether or not he was the masked leader of the rite.[25] He causes Bill's ego mask to slip several times as the doctor is told that he was seen at the orgy by his wealthy patient, and that the Woman's sacrificial redemption of him was merely staged. Ziegler slaps Bill on the shoulders in a fatherly gesture of encouragement, but the doctor shudders at the older man's touch. The hypertheatre of the orgy rite has been illuminated by Ziegler's revelations. Yet the mystery of what the Woman wanted remains: Was her sacrifice real—repaying the doctor for saving his life—or just staged as part of her hooker's job? The degree of villainy in the ritual leader and his masked congregation is put in doubt by Ziegler's words, even as he admits he was one of them. He insists that they did not kill the Woman or harm Nick Nightingale (for giving Bill the password) beyond a bruise on his face, but merely took him out of his New York hotel and sent him back to Seattle. And yet, Ziegler admits that he himself had Bill followed after the orgy and insists that the masked people of that perverse rite are dangerous and powerful: "if I told you their names . . . I don't think you'd sleep so well." Are Ziegler and his perverse comrades truly violent or merely bluffing now, as at the orgy's "phony sacrifice"? Are they Mafia-like gangsters, mainstream patriarchs above the law, or just rich and decadent?

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25. See Raphael (1999b, p. 165), on this scene "as a kind of love scene," with an "Oedipal thing going on" and Ziegler as "the demanding, protective, castrating father."

The threat of grave danger remains, but Ziegler is not a clear-cut melodramatic villain. His analysis of Bill's belief in the orgy sacrifice, as a masturbatory fantasy, undermines the hero's oedipal quest to find, save, and love the Woman. The primal fathers have tricked him, playing into Bill's fantasy of a beautiful Woman as sacrificial (m)Other. Of course, Ziegler could be lying, as another kind of trick. Either way, he demonstrates that the obscene fathers are vulnerable to and scared of Bill—because they are trying to scare him. But they also have masqued, with their phony and yet real staging of sacrifice, his and their greater fear of the Woman's jouissance[26]—of the (m)Other who gives all and thus threatens to overwhelm the subject, as object of Her perverse love. That is why the fathers create their extravagant orgy rite and why Bill and the film audience are lured into it: to idealize female beauty and patriarchal desire, in perverse forms, as a defense against the drive—against feminine jouissance in the body's ecstatic mortality.

A private sexual act might involve the thrill of the "little death" in its climax. But an orgy rite, like a movie or stage play, incorporates the communal force of erotic life and death. Especially with the masked nudes of Kubrick's film (and their masked spectators), the anonymous force of life in each body is revealed. Although their ritual is highly formalized, indicating certain human structures of power, the base force of Dionysian, orgiastic life is the ultimate attraction in the puppet theatre of the mansion. The erotic energy of the masked nudes ignores individual personality, using the human body as a shell to reproduce the species (and recombine genetic codes), then discarding it. Even the beauty of self-sacrificing maternal love (to which the oedipal subject longs to return), while involving imaginary and symbolic structures of desire, is driven by the Real erotics and deadly objective of reproduction. Beauty that destroys itself, like Mandy's (whether in the communal rite or

26. Ziegler also tells Bill: "Nothing happened to her [Mandy] after you left that party that hadn't happened to her before. She got her brains fucked out. Period." This shows the desire, yet fear of, ideal beauty and feminine jouissance turning into repeated aggression—in the orgy rite and in Ziegler's later words.

by a personal drug habit), shows the Real side of various imaginary and symbolic attempts, by Bill and the primal fathers, to possess and display her as a sublime, mysterious object. Yet, the tragic twists of *Eyes* also reveal such an alienating force within the cinematic apparatus itself: the attractive and repulsive, creative and destructive, reproductively malign energy of erotic life and its death drive onscreen, which is also a tapeworm in the guts of the audience.

Bill hits a vision of his own spirit as a bone[27]—of his *aphanisis* (disappearance), like Mandy's, in the Real hollow of symbolic rites and imaginary realities—when he goes home after his meeting with Ziegler. His perverse, fatherly friend had tried to reassure him about the whore's nonsacrificial death (as he slapped him on the shoulders): "Someone died. It happens all the time. But life goes on. It always does. Until it doesn't."[28] Yet, *Eyes Wide Shut* shows that Bill and Alice are already suffering a symbolic death, through their disintegrating marriage. They thus enter "a limit zone between life and death"[29]—with the obscene desires of her fantasy and dream, and of his erotic odyssey. When Bill arrives at home, he finds the mask he had worn at the orgy on the pillow next to his wife in their bed. (It had been missing when he returned the costume.) His hand clutches his chest at the sight of her sleeping next to the disembodied mask. Then he collapses in tears against her body. Awake now, she strokes his head against her breast, creating a pietà-like tableau, as Bill says through his tears, his voice crumbling: "I'll tell you everything."

All the paranoia in Bill's melodramatic battle with the primal fathers—of being threatened by them at the orgy, of barely being saved from physical punishment at their hands, of being followed afterwards, of being in grave danger like Nick and Mandy, of being

27. See Žižek 's use of the Hegelian phrase, "the Spirit is a bone" (2000, pp. 28–30 and 1989, pp. 207–209).

28. This line became even more meaningful with Kubrick's sudden death at age 70, with a massive heart attack in his sleep, just a few months before the film's scheduled release.

29. Lacan (1992, pp. 272, 280) regarding Sophocles' tragic characters, especially Antigone.

tricked by Ziegler and his friends—ends in tragic honesty with his wife. Wisely, however, Alice does not overdramatize the situation; neither does Kubrick. He only shows the aftermath of Bill's revelations, with Alice's red, tearful face, silent for a while. She then says that their daughter expects them all to go Christmas shopping together that morning. Inside the store, with a "Jingle Bells" tune playing in the background, their daughter walks ahead of them, looking enthusiastically at various toys that Santa might bring her. Bill asks his wife what they should do, now that they have both been unfaithful in their desires. She replies that maybe they should be grateful they survived their adventures, whether real or imagined, and that she does love him. In effect, she lets him off the hook for his orgy adventure, and tells him she wants to stay together, that one night is not the "whole truth." But he presses the point, asking, "Are you sure?" and insisting that dreams are real, too. She allows him to have this equaling of their obscene affairs. But when he says they are awake now "forever," she refutes that word. A very similar dialogue occurs in Schnitzler's novel (p. 166), but Kubrick and Rafael add a final, tragicomic twist. Alice says there is one important thing they must do as soon as possible: "fuck." And the screen goes black.

This postmodern, open ending—unlike Schnitzler's "victorious" sunlight, "clear laughter" of a child, and a "new day" beginning (1990, p. 167)—portends many further battles in this marriage (in the actors' as well as the characters'). Alice's desires may still wander toward many other presents in her memories and fantasies, far beyond her daughter's Christmas choices in the final scene of an old-fashioned stroller, a large teddy bear (on which Alice checks the price tag), and a Barbie doll. Bill might also pursue further erotic possibilities, while mistrusting his wife, in order to masque his fear of the limit zone and death drive within them. But the tragic consequences of such actions and dreams have been clarified, along with the Lacanian maxim, "there is no sexual relation" (see Fink 1995, pp. 104–105; see also Žižek 2000, pp. 71, 75). The film viewer is likewise left with a crucial cathartic choice: enjoy the narcissistic splash into the screen's voyeuristic fourth wall, even

to the degree of drowning in its romantic and melodramatic fantasies, or take a more complex, critical, and tragic view, looking beyond the beautiful illusions of screen sacrifice toward the Real—the gaze of mortality and lack of being in the apparatus and its audience.

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# 5

# *Romancing the Capital: Choice, Love, and Contradiction in* The Family Man *and* Memento

ANNA KORNBLUH

The intersection of San Vicente and Wilshire Boulevards in Los Angeles is one of innumerable corners where the homeless reside. Even the most hurried commuters register what the signs say: "Vietnam Vet Needs Help," "Will Work For Food," "God Bless." The other night I saw a gentleman holding a sign with a slightly modified message—*Homeless Vet Appreciates Any Help At All, Even Just Saying "Hi."* It doesn't take a Lacanian-Marxist theory about the relationship between subjectivity and economy for him to know that he stands on that corner precisely because people will not say "Hi." Already, the abjection that defines his life enables him to see how the systemic cruelties of capitalism are sustained by our social imaginary. The very ways in which we imagine ourselves connected to or isolated from the others around us, the very intimate lexicon whereby we choose whom to love, how to live, whether or not to say "Hi," reflect the coordinates of our political projects. The following argument is not for that man, but rather for anyone who still needs to know.

The choice whether or not to say "Hi" may not be enumerated among the esteemed freedoms that constitute North American democracy, but "choice" itself is indispensable to the U.S. politicocultural imaginary. From the irrepressible variety of colas to the indeterminate options of the butterfly ballot, we live in a world of choice. Choice figures prominently in the rhetoric of diverse political locations: the left wing has choice ("pro-choice"), the right wing has choice ("school choice"), and the center has choice (choice of party affiliation). In the liberal democratic tradition, choice manifests the hinterland of freedom beyond necessity, the constitution of something determined from an otherwise undetermined array of possibility: my vote is my personhood, the embodiment of my willful capacity to be all I can be. Against this axis of freedom-versus-necessity, Marxist social theory, psychoanalysis, and modern philosophy offer complementary alternate latitudes for thinking "choice." The fundamental Marxist insight is that the liberal "freedom of choice" framework tacitly endorses a preexisting set of ideological, legal, and economical relations within which choice is possible but constrained—either limited in scope and significance or limited to some groups at the exclusion of others. The Marxist choice is thus the choice (or change) of this very presupposed set. Psychoanalysis has its own designation of a structurally similar gesture of constitution: "fundamental fantasy," an unconscious choice of the coordinates that predetermine the objects we shall choose as objects of our desire.

Every modern philosophy of subjectivity inventories the *minimal positing* of every horizon of meaning. Nothing is simply given; in order to organize untamed contact with the Real into a coherent, consistent experience of "reality," the subject has to bridge the gap through an abyssal act of freedom—as Jean-Paul Sartre put it, the subject has to choose his/her fundamental existential project. This choice effectively is the object-cause of Western philosophy. For Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, every thinking agent is confronted by the predicament of meaning that is not logically grounded in immediate experience, but s/he nonetheless takes the primordial risk to think; for deconstruction and structural linguistics, every

subject-to-language is existentially bound to the knowledge that language fails, but is nonetheless doomed to act as if s/he does not have that knowledge; for Freud and Lacan, every desiring subject is inextricably tied to the knowledge that the primal fantasy is false, but is nonetheless mandated to act as if that fantasy is true. What all these versions have in common is the idea that there is a choice more fundamental than the choices we make within our daily social reality, a protochoice that establishes the very coordinates within which we choose. The richness of this commonality is attested to by the parallel occupation of nonacademic modes of analysis with this primal choice. Hollywood cinema, arguably the most important ideologico-cultural engine of today's world, devotes an entire genre to dramatic exposition of choice: the Alternate Reality story.

The scenario within a scenario, the film within a film, the vision guided by an angel, and the dream sequence of films like *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*, *Blind Chance*, *Sliding Doors*, *Wayne's World*, *Run Lola Run*, *Me Myself & I* all revolve around the spectre of the road not taken. The "forking-path" narrative often juxtaposes two (or more) equally possible realities in order to facilitate, explicate, or annihilate a key choice the hero must make. At times the aim is to provide the hero with a supernaturally omniscient perspective from which to chart a particular course: George Bailey's view of the community without him illuminates his reasons for living, enabling him to choose not to commit suicide. At others, the alternative is staged for the spectator in the service of some philosophical perspective: Lola works her way through three different scenarios to ruminate over luck, possibility, fate, and choice. The enhancement of the hero's innate ability to choose with some extrasensory information comprises the liberal cinema of choice—a set or system is pregiven, we get to choose the mode of modification. John Sayles's *Lone Star*, in which a half-brother and sister choose to remain in love even after learning of their blood relation, hints to the psychoanalytic cinema of choice. Our story is what we tell ourselves; the liberal supplementary information is fantastical—not illusory, but designated as

"information" precisely by the libido. The Marxist cinema of choice looks something like *The Matrix*, in which the choice to know (made by Neo) or not to know (made by Cypher) directly constitutes the entire social reality within which the chooser will find himself.

Two recent Hollywood releases mark a turning point for the cinema of choice. The films represent two different modes of closure of the alternate reality genre. One crystallizes the liberal fantasy of omnipotent choice; the other disturbingly renders the dependence of reality as such upon fantasy. *The Family Man* (Brett Ratner, 2000) is a mundane love story, but its partner in culmination, *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2001), is a brilliant entanglement of fantasy, memory, and trauma. They are, indeed, an odd couple, but this counterintuitive conjunction will effectively elucidate the parameters of "choice" operative in Hollywood today. Review of the narrative trajectories and climaxes of these two films will canvass their opposing approaches to the same liberal imaginary of choice, providing an index of the context within which we choose our candidates, choose our lovers, and choose to say "Hi."

## TO HAVE IT ALL

In a recent advertising campaign for the Ford Escape SUV, job titles ("customer service manager") encaption an image of a young professional toiling in an office, before the footage cuts to the same individual in casual clothing playing guitar in a bohemian backyard, now described by a transformation of the job title into the word "musician." The remarkable "you are not your job" message expressly hails an alienated consumer (We know you're just an exploited, alienated slave, we know that you have this self-awareness, but this explosive combination of alienation and self-consciousness is the reason, par excellence, to work harder, get richer, and buy more stuff!). But alienation is here delimited specifically: you are not your job, but that's because you're so much greater than the hours of 9 to 5; you're such an abundance of life that you naturally

need to seek fulfillment in multiple arenas (shopping, sports, romance). Alienation here appears as a psychological / individual / existential condition remedied by individual behavior, a rendition that is ridiculously divergent from the systematic assessment of alienation as a social relationship of people to the conditions of their labor. Such divergence is accomplished by the luster of Ford's correspondence between alienation and consumption, which effectively precludes alternative articulations. The commercial offers a perspective of "the system" that purports critically to indict the unsavory excess of that very system, alienation. If this looks like revolutionary Fordian Marxism, the commercial quickly bares its teeth, through articulating alienation as lack of subjective fulfillment, and consequently formulating this excess as directly containable. In this decoy *Ideologiekritik*, we are thus hailed as critics and then spoon-fed criticism, in a gesture that expressly designs symptomatic behavior, such as the acceptance of certain resolution strategies (consuming the Ford Escape) at the expense of others (social change).

Ford therefore constructs a social reality within which we can have the proverbial cake of the system and eat it in a (false) transgressive gesture. You can be a ruthless corporate raider *and* a warm humanitarian, an alienated worker *and* a private person with a rich emotional life. Far from the condition of possible failure of ideology, alienation is now the precondition of ideological functioning. The system itself logically identifies its own excess, only to proffer its containment / resolution. The mark of the incommensurability between these systemic self-criticisms and some more radical criticism is the fact that the systemically indicted excess is never the true excess—it is always a decoy. The true excess is therefore functionally neutralized by this partnership of the system and its decoys, which in this case are both a decoy excess (a limited formula of alienation) and a decoy containment (consumption) that conspire to erase the possibility of true resolution from the dominant imaginary. To put all this in the terms of choice, the very idea that, as the Ford commercial suggests, a choice exists between suffering the (decoy) excess (a state of alienation) and

critiquing it through instituting its (decoy) containment (more shopping!) renders invisible the true choice, that of critically exposing the true excess in order to undermine the system itself.

Today's hegemonic ideology bombards us with claims that we live in a "reflexive society" in which individuals get to choose not only their profession, beliefs, mates, and so forth, but even characteristics that were until recently experienced as something imposed by either nature or tradition (physical anatomy, spirituality, sexual orientation, ethnic identity).[1] The ideology of free choices finds its ultimate expression in the genre of alternate histories (whether the Hollywood alternate reality film or new historiography), in which events are presented as if their final outcome hinges only upon a contingent turn: if, some time ago, I / Hitler were to make a different decision, my whole life / all of social life would have been different. . . . The problem with this ideology, of course, is that it serves to cover up its *exact opposite*: the absence of true choices. In our "postpolitical" or "postideological" era, we can make as many choices (Coke or Pepsi?) as we want—on condition that they remain fundamentally trivial, that they do not concern things that really matter (like the social relations of domination).

Underlying the paradigmatic narrative expression of "freedom of choice" (the alternate reality story) is thus a contrary impulse, the wish to live *free of choice*. The fantastical support of the contemporary proliferation of choices is the fantasy of a reality without choice. What explains this paradox? The ideology of free choices presents itself in cynical terms, whereby we can both survey a range of choices and acknowledge the limitations of that range. To refer again to the Ford commercial, we accept that the SUV is an effective escape from alienated labor (even as consuming it requires us to continue working) only because we already accept that there is no possible systemic redress of alienation (we consider it impossible to redefine the conditions of our labor). This mode of reasoning enables us to acknowledge the absurdity of the

1. See the discussion of Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* in Žižek (1989).

order of things while nonetheless continuing to comply (see Beck 1992). The composite effect of maintaining simultaneously that we have a wealth of choices and that our choices are limited in significance is that we get to sustain the repression of the more primal choice (to accept these conditions). In other words, if we take as ideological this repression of reality-instituting choices, the form of ideological success today is the appearance of a contradiction. On the one hand, enjoy your many choices; on the other, openly acknowledge that you fantasize about reality without choice. I am suggesting here a distinct relationship between contradiction and ideology. Marxist criticism of ideology often holds that ideology is the imaginary solution of real contradictions; in this Ford commercial (and in the films in the following discussion), ideology is the cathecting of real contradictions into decoy contradictions. This moment of contradiction is also known as the critical distance that, far from inhibiting interpellation, is its condition. In the famous Althusserian scene of the pedestrian on the street who automatically turns around to respond to a cop calling "Hey you" (Althusser 1971, p. 163), this minimal distance is evident in the very fact that the pedestrian initially walked past the cop, or rather walked anywhere at all other than straight into the police station.

Consequently, we should avoid the trap of celebrating the "ambiguity" in representation of multiple possible realities. This ambiguity allegedly inheres in the dual implication that reality is open / life is subject to choice *and* that reality is closed / life is fated, even if fate takes the form of chance. The bind to be avoided here is the simple opposition of good opening with bad closure, for an opening can be ideological insofar as the openings are always already territorialized as part of a system (decoy openings), and a closure can be liberating insofar as it demarcates the limit or edge of a system, against which it becomes possible to envision a revolutionary beyond. The stereotypically "postmodern" inclination to read life as ambiguous and cultural texts as ambiguous commentaries on ambiguity should therefore be modified toward strict scrutiny of the specific policies of ambiguity that are unambiguously asserted by specific texts.

*The Family Man* unambiguously asserts the importance of extracting closure from an ambiguous open field of possibilities. The closure becomes gratifying in its conveyance of omnipotent agency: I make my destiny. The sense of power derived from that closure is about the opportunity to have everything—that is, closing the field by possessing all possible options, which is precisely not closing the field by choosing among options. The alternate reality here does not serve to enlighten some specific choice as much as to teach the hero the egregious error of his past acquiescence to choice, and to invite recuperation of a choice-free state. In so instructing, *The Family Man* depicts the drive to internalize the alternate reality, to add its positive features to extant reality. This process of internalization evacuates the choice (which reality to have, whether or not to commit suicide, whether or not to marry your college sweetheart) of its very decisive content by reorganizing the positive features of both options into a singular, teleological progression toward perfect harmony with an admittedly imperfect (alienating) system. Because the film weaves together a variety of complex explications (of capitalism, of alienation, of fantasy, of choice, of love), a detailed synopsis will facilitate further argumentation.

We begin at the airport, 1987. A young couple, about to be separated by a departing flight, reviews their plan: Jack (Nicolas Cage) is heading to London for a Barclays internship and Kate (Tea Leoni) will begin law school. Feeling anxious, Kate clings to Jack: "The plan doesn't make us great. What we have together makes us great," to which Jack firmly replies, "I love you. One year in London won't change that." To undercut Jack's assertion that love will last, the film jumps ahead thirteen years to Jack lying alone in a large bed. Lest we doubt our hero's prowess and normality, supermodel Amber Valletta emerges from the bathroom, slipping a white fur coat over black lingerie. As she congratulates Jack on his performance the night before, he asks to see her again that night, eliciting the response, "I can't. It's Christmas Eve. But it was very nice meeting you." Presto. One scene proves Jack's promise to Kate broken, asserts his triumphant libido, and nonetheless degrades his

circumstances. Poor Jack. All alone on Christmas Eve, and reduced to sex with strangers.

Luckily, Jack's attributes are touted in the following sequence: he showers, dresses, and delights in an apartment that the camera reveals to be extremely luxurious. Opera music crescendos as Jack inhales deeply and surveys his kingdom, a panoramic view of Manhattan. We soon find Jack at work, presiding over a large boardroom of white men in suits, and booming instructions for a looming project deadline. Jack is the vice president of a firm of corporate architects, the ultimate symbolic manipulators. Surpassing generic consultancy, corporate architecture is the pinnacle of abstract capital, the highly specialized field of designing corporate mergers. When Jack's right-hand man whimpers some reference to the growing lateness of the hour, Jack cloyingly retorts, "Christmas Eve, is that tonight?" and then rebounds "This is a MERGER, people! You don't ask it for a vacation!"

Jack eventually releases the staff, and receives a message from his assistant that Kate has called him out of the blue. The assistant, properly plump and middle-aged, inquires as to what happened so long ago, and Jack says firmly, "I took the road less traveled." The conversation is interrupted by the entrance of a distinguished gray-haired CEO type. He raises a crystal tumbler of scotch and lovingly exclaims, "8:30 on Christmas Eve. Jack, you're a credit to capitalism." Peter advises Jack on the matter of returning Kate's call in strict financial terms: "Old flames are like old tax returns. You keep them in a file cabinet for three years and then you turn them loose."

Leaving the office amid gently falling snow, Jack stops at a convenience store, where he intervenes in a robbery perpetrated, in typical Hollywood fashion, by a young black man against an Asian merchant. Jack exercises his powers of salesmanship to "make a business deal" with the robber (Don Cheadle), and the situation is diffused. As they exit the store, the robber asks Jack what he's missing in his life. Powerful, rich, and white, Jack responds, "I have everything I've ever wanted." The man takes issue, insisting that Jack must need something. Jack persists in adulation of his own

hard-won happiness. Eventually the man says, "Fine. Just remember, you brought this on yourself."

Jack awakens the next morning in a parallel universe, the contours of which are quickly revealed. He returned from London a week after leaving; Kate and Jack married, had two children, and moved to New Jersey; Kate is a public interest lawyer; Jack is a tire salesman; their life is middle-class mediocrity to the core, but somehow joyful. Alarmed at his new reality, Jack flees for the city (Christmas morning be damned). When the doorman at his office fails to recognize him, the robber from the night before appears, driving Jack's Ferrari. The man says that he is offering Jack "a glimpse" and that it will last "as much time as it takes." Defeated, Jack finally returns to his New Jersey abode, only to get lost en route. Luckily, he stumbles upon his best friend, who takes him aside for a heart to heart. He points to Jack's house: "4 bedrooms, 2.5 baths, a basement, and kids—look what good you've done. Don't screw up the best thing in your life just because you're a little unsure about who you are."

As time lapses, Jack ponders taking advantage of his situation by having an affair with another woman in the social circle, notorious for her unabashed pursuit of him. Upon confessing his intentions to his buddy, Jack learns that Kate and he are truly in love and truly the envy of the town. Flummoxed that Jack would jeopardize his ideal union with Kate, the friend responds, "Are you crazy? The Fidelity Bank and Trust is a tough creditor! You make a deposit somewhere else, and they close your account forever!" Jack slowly realizes that his life in New Jersey is actually rich with love. Kate and Jack have an anniversary dinner in the city, at his behest, which culminates in a romantic tryst in a hotel—their first sexual encounter, all others having failed (on account of Jack's lack of interest or exhaustion or insensitivity). Sex, it seems, is possible only in conditions of love (but is also inessential, offscreen). Fortified by consummation and the thrill of the city, Jack ventures to his old firm, using his insider knowledge to earn an audience with Peter and earn his old job back, replete with a company penthouse in the city. With this perfect plan of maximum happiness (domes-

tic bliss, power on the job, financial ascendancy, life in the city—not to mention authentic meritocratic triumph), Jack presents to Kate the outline of their great transformation. He says, "It will be a better life for all of us. It's the center of the universe. If the USA is the Roman Empire, then New York City is Rome itself! We can have the perfect life, the whole package." Kate resists, arguing that their life in New Jersey is the essence of their familial happiness, and that she wants to grow old with him in their home. Jack persists: "We'll finally get back on track. I need to do that as a man. Think of it, Kate. No more lousy restaurants, no more cutting coupons. I'm talking about finally having a life that other people envy." Tearfully, Kate asserts, "They already do." The discussion reaches an impasse and Jack leaves for the night. When he returns the next day, Kate has decided that she will go along with whatever Jack needs. "I'll move wherever because I love you. *I love you.* And that's more important than our address. I choose us."

Having successfully achieved, on his own, the integration of the two worlds (domestic romance, financial power), Jack's glimpse is ended. He awakens in his serene apartment on Christmas morning, like nothing had ever happened. He meets up with the agent of his alter-ego experience, who reminds him that glimpses are impermanent. Utterly alone on Christmas day, Jack returns Kate's phone call. She arranges for him to come by her place, which he finds disarrayed, as Kate is moving—to Paris. Unmarried and rich, Kate has decided to change her scenery by taking a position with her corporate law firm's French office. She has, after all this time, contacted Jack because her packing has unearthed old belongings of his she seeks to return. Jack is palpably dejected, and the news that Kate's plane leaves that very evening renders his glimpse into what could have been utterly useless. He wishes her well and leaves her apartment, spending the day wandering in his loneliness.

As evening falls, Jack impulsively travels to the airport, completing the cycle of the film. Just as Kate is about to board, he calls her name. They have an intense exchange in which she coolly insists that he can't possibly think there is anything left of their relationship. Kate apologizes, but maintains her ground: their relationship

has been over for thirteen years, and she has to leave. As she hands her ticket to the gate agent, Jack shouts details of their world together: "We have a house in Jersey. Two little girls. You're completely nonprofit. We're in love. You're a better person than I am." These portentous declarations are enough to change her mind. Kate agrees to delay her trip for one night, and the film ends with a long shot of the couple having a cup of coffee in the airport terminal.

In the course of the film, the spectator is compelled to accept that the two apparent accidents at the beginning of the story both had a secret meaning: the fact that Kate calls Jack (she thought she was just getting rid of old baggage; little did she know that destiny was guiding her hand), and the fact that Jack intervenes in a robbery (the stickup is just the mask of the Messenger of Fate who opens Jack's eyes to his own existential lack and thus leads him to the alternate path). This secret fate needs simply to be discovered, or rendered conscious. Indeed, Jack's alternate reality serves an almost psychoanalytic function, allowing him to discover the repressed lack at the core of his seemingly rich life. Just as the Ford commercial contains an extracritical element in its direct expression of the resolution of alienation, Jack's exploration contains a radically nonpsychoanalytical element, *the direct positing of a solution to Jack's lack*. He simply must erect the integration of his two realities (matrimonial bliss and the Dow Jones), thereby gaining knowledge of and control over his unconscious and peacefully coexisting with an admittedly excessive system. The admission of excess emerges in the portrayal of "lack": introduced in the second scene when we learn that Jack will be alone for Christmas Eve, the notion is given a systemic valence when we see Jack at work, without regard for the holiday.

Because Jack's glimpse is initiated when he professes to the black man that he has everything he needs, his implied error in judgment further develops this notion. From the second scene, the narrative is organized around the question, "What does Jack lack?" Jack is precisely not lacking power, not lacking money, not lacking affirmation, and not lacking sex (we learn all this in the beginning of the film), so the property of his lack has to be particularly

elucidated. And the essence of the film's ideology is to be found in the specific work of this elucidation, which traverses the tense gap between the broad address of "lack" and the narrative's final delimitation of lack. The film makes the spectator an offer he can't refuse: it expounds "lack" as a lack of heteronormative, monogamous, romantic love. However, Jack's elaborate supernatural quest for love is only comprehensible when measured against the magnitude of actual social alienation. For in order to accept that *über*-rich corporate architects are still in need of spiritual intervention even if they are nice (Jack chats with his doorman, takes love advice from his secretary), some notion of alienation must be minimally operative. Alienation then becomes the condition of possibility of the film's narrative intelligibility. In that process of becoming so intelligible, the film also accomplishes the association of social alienation with lack of romantic love.

Jack is lacking in an at first unspecified way, and the very process of specification of his lack manifests a self-conscious shift of the dominant ideology: the passage from the liberal (Fordian) perspective on excess (the system is fundamentally good, but some of the apples are bad / poor / alienated) to an even more radical analysis (the system causes apples to be bad / alienated, but romance is the answer to that badness / alienation). Because Jack is a virtuous, self-made executive, and a generally nice guy, the integration depicted in *The Family Man* has nothing to do with the standard realization that it's okay to be a humanitarian. *The Family Man* is not the story of a jerk who learns how to be a nice guy because he falls in love (as in *As Good As It Gets*), but rather a succinct encapsulation of the power of romance to sustain the system: Jack is a credit to capitalism who needs a little love to keep it all going. While the standard alternate reality vision (i.e., *It's a Wonderful Life*) concerns the construction of a universal perspective / plenitude of knowledge whereby a particular choice can be undertaken, the glimpse in *The Family Man* instructs Jack in how *not* to face a particular choice, how to construct a reality wherein choice shifts from choosing between A or B to simply having *both* A *and* B. The comprehensibility of this instruction is directly dependent upon a

common indictment of the need for instruction. *The Family Man* first articulates this basis of lack (social alienation); then it performs the semiotic work whereby lack comes to connote lack of heteronormative romantic love; finally it expressly posits the integration-of-excess as a strategy for fulfilling lack.

## TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

The ideological work of the film lies in the direct translation of alienation into a need for love, which is also to say in the erection of a decoy alienation. Jack's glimpse teaches him that even the most celebrated of successes on the capitalist ladder still leave something to be desired: "us." Since "the plan doesn't make us great," love is really the Thing. Love is what Jack needs. It's not communal connection, it's not political representation, it's not control of the means of production—it's just love. *There is no logical, inevitable progression from social lack to lack of romantic monogamy*. That *The Family Man* grafts the answer "love" onto the question of "lack" is therefore not simply a positive assertion that "love soothes all" but is simultaneously a refusal of the prospect that anticapitalist struggle can soothe anything. When love is constructed as the solution to alienation, all political critique is thereby automatically denigrated as "merely ideological," since the implication is that (loveless) politics always miss the "real" need. *The Family Man* presents romance as the solution to the choice of whether or not to be alienated. Demarcation of choice in this way functionally negates the existence of the true choice (to accept or reject the existing system). "Negation" here is not a gesture of *hiding* something from the narrative, but rather a tactic of *representation* that actively presents the decoy in order to render nonexistent / structurally impossible the true choice. The dynamic of negation must be understood as a process whereby a system hides its traumatic excess precisely through exposing a decoy excess (lack of love). The message is simple: okay, you got us, we admit it, capitalism has

problems—you're alienated, you suffer . . . and that's because you lack true love.

Systems constitute and sustain their universality (that is, they successfully coexist with their own true excess / abject) through localizing some particular excess as their one and only excess. Take, for example, capital punishment. The state exhibits the death penalty as excessive state violence to induce an affect of localization and confinement. State violence is not everywhere, not the underlying fact of contemporary social life—because when the state executes an inmate, *there* is the scene of state violence. The excessive, irrational spectacle of the death penalty in contemporary society befogs the infusion of violence in our daily lives under this machine. This operation of performing an excess evokes the Foucauldian perspective that "power is tolerable only on condition that it mask a substantial part of itself" (Foucault 1984, p. 86), but here a mask is not always a deceptive, alternate face. It is, rather, an elaborate and substantive decoy whose operation of obscurity lies not in deception but in delimited perception. In positing just such a decoy, *The Family Man* accomplishes negation of choice by identifying Jack's lack in specific terms (the decoy lack) and offering the solution to that lack as the achievement of integration of alternatives—not just positive assurance that the road not taken ought not be taken, but emphatic certainty that if you play your cards right, you never have to come to a fork in the road—you get to disavow the primordial choice to accept the system.

The crisis of *The Family Man* is that it fails at this assertion; the reality it erects is inconsistent. Two crucial points of cheating / exaggeration mark this inconsistency: the exploitation of the trope of black-man-as-agent-of-enlightenment and the temporal paradox of the finale. Recent films like *Ghost*, *The Green Mile*, *Lethal Weapon*, *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *Save the Last Dance*, and *The Matrix* evidence an increasing exaggeration of the stereotype of the black sidekick: from the intellectually inferior-but-heartwarming companion to the street-smart, down-to-earth wise man to the vaguely fraudulent psychic to the ghost to the supernaturally endowed

traveler between two worlds. It is as if the only way to esteem the perspective of a black person is to denigrate his subjective existence: he's not simply the other, he's dead. *The Family Man* extends this trope to the point of nonsense, since in it the supernatural other is simultaneously the safekeeper of essential knowledge (the Lacanian *sujet supposé savoir*) and an inconsequential object (the Lacanian *objet petit a*). The guide has none of his own scenes (in which the audience might see him presiding over a bubbling cauldron, speaking in tongues about Jack's need for Love); his intervention is never fully accessed—while Jack initially disparages his new life, he never challenges the intervention's structure; and the guide is denied a final moment of supervisory satisfaction, in which he might nod approvingly as Jack and Kate have coffee in the airport.

The second exaggeration, the time paradox in the finale of *The Family Man*, reveals the inconsistency of integrated reality. The film could easily have ended with Jack's successful transformation of the banal but love-ly New Jersey life into the high-style, high-velocity world of Manhattan and corporate architecture. Instead, at the exact moment of that accomplishment, Jack's glimpse of the other reality ends, and he wakes up alone in his penthouse back on Christmas morning. Having acquired a distance from his own conditions of existence, Jack's mission is clear: he has to find true love *from within* his alienated high-class life. Anyone can work his way up the corporate ladder from middle-class New Jersey (everyone can have The American Dream), but only the truly talented can work their way into true love from Wall Street (there's a new American dream: Love). The film cannot just conclude with Jack's successful integration of alternate realities because the fundamental problem has nothing to do with how to make it financially—it's about how to make it romantically, since the very idea of how difficult it is to make it financially is erased from the horizon of the film. Armed with this knowledge of the real stakes, the real challenge, the real dream, Jack is forced temporally to cheat in order to win Kate's favor at the airport. He has to refer to impossible knowledge of their possible future ("we have two kids . . .") because Jack's "glimpse" is not simply an alternate possibility, it is

the *imperative secondary dimension of the possibility he already inhabits*. Kate responds to this impossible significance (when anyone else might find Jack insane) because she "went corporate" and is therefore equally subject to this imperative. The narrative apologizes for this cheating by ending with the mere prospect of romantic bliss—an elision of the happy ending that also rests apace of the film's perspective that financial freedom and vocational success abound but private emotional happiness is rare.

Popular romantic dramadies of the 1990s at large revolve around this rarity, constructing heteronormative romance as almost impossible—a construction that marks a certain departure from other configurations of romantic trials. Where love in Jane Austen is thwarted by class / social antagonism, love in today's Hollywood is the solution to social antagonism, but that solution is precious and rare. The architecture of this scarcity is paralleled by the declining significance of the sexual act: we are witnessing a preponderance of films that forsake sex for the pursuit of love. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Never Been Kissed*, *The Wedding Singer*, *The Wedding Planner*, *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *The Truth About Cats & Dogs*, ad infinitum, characters of innumerable resources (good jobs, happy families, close friends) relentlessly strive for the one thing they lack: love. The primacy of this pursuit is evident in the style of today's trailers, which increasingly reveal within 120 seconds a film's entire plot trajectory. Far from deterring audiences ("I don't need to see that one, the whole story is in the preview: he gets the girl in the end"), this full disclosure is the condition of ticket sales: today's romantic dramadies have nothing to do with whether or not we end up in love and everything to do with the impossible hurdles that must be surmounted in order to end up there. The charting of this impossible romance that nonetheless ultimately triumphs galvanizes a certain faith: the odds are stacked, your journey is difficult, but your victory is certain. It is this very faith that is unavailable from politics—in contingent moments of intervention, the outcome is never guaranteed. With success risky but likely, the striving for love starts to look a lot more compelling than the political resolution of antagonism. That these two trials

are even comparable is the wager of argument here: dominant cynical culture circulates an indictment of alienation, mobilizing an authentic quest for social change, while simultaneously furnishing (decoy) blueprints for that struggle (how to fall in love).

The very fact that love is fervently delimited as romantic even while expressly contextualized as social points to an ambiguity more profound than linguistic. Such ambiguity is reflected in the enigmatic Lacanian assertion that love makes up for the impossibility of sexual relationship (1998, p. 45). It can mean that love is an imaginary lure that conceals sexual antagonism, or it can mean that, when in love, the subject is willing to live with the antagonism. In Hollywood, this thesis is given a further twist: the impossibility inherent to the social order itself (the social antagonism) is being transposed onto love. Deployment of love to mask social impossibility is a familiar fascistic tactic, but Hollywood elaborates that obfuscation. Today, love itself is directly elevated to the status of the impossible.

Romantic impossibility functions as a decoy impossibility, diverting attention from the impossibility of social relationships under capitalism, and positing a succinct goal in the place of the vertiginous infinity of anticapitalist revolution. In psychoanalysis, the "decoy" arises via "displacement," the projection of one emotional complexity onto another, somehow more tolerable, dilemma. The wedding factory transposes general social malaise—feelings of loss, systematic disconnection, and impossibility of community—onto the pursuit of romance. Instead of addressing the systematic debilitation of human social relationships (the void of public space, the privatization of all aspects of daily life, the power of the few over the many, the unjust distribution of resources), we are taught by the Oedipus industrial complex that the answer to all of our worldly problems is love.

*The Family Man* is the radical pinnacle of this genre of romantic impossibility in its very obscene explication of the link between romance and capitalism. It takes the Hollywood trend of romantic scarcity to its summit through a variety of obscenities. Jack is the paradigmatic capitalist; his alternate reality disgusts him not for

its emotive / humanitarian / mushy content but because it is terrifyingly middle-class; his lack is not a general lack of kindheartedness / affective capacity, but a lack of love; heteronormative, monogamous romantic love is not just a pleasant addition to an otherwise resourceful life but the very condition of a meaningful life.

The pervasive pursuit of this private love absolves us of our forgetting of public love. In order to pass a homeless person crouched in a doorway and *keep walking*, in order to *enjoy* dinner when children are hungry, in order to *rest* at night when suffering is incessant—in short, in order to function—the system demands that we *disconnect*, that is, that we rigorously foreclose our affections for and connections with others. (In the words of dominant culture, our economy is composed of individuals who respect each other's individuality.) Behind the caricature of the bleeding-heart liberal is the principle of politics: how you feel is how you act. Our political schemas of needs and rights are grounded in our imaginary map of individual independence. The old New-Left claim that republicans are psychologically bankrupt is a reminder that systems of power necessitate specific emotional configurations. It is this very need, this very structural mutuality of "public" and "private," that fervently endeavors to mask itself through insisting upon the structural exclusivity of emotions (including the unconscious) and political economy.

In repeatedly invoking financial imagery (tax returns, fidelity bank and trust) to convey relationship advice, *The Family Man* tiptoes the tightrope of dangerous acknowledgment that in the capitalist unconscious, love is explicitly structured like a bargain. The point of abstract humanitarian love, and the point of capitalist romantic love, is precisely to enable us to *keep walking*. And through this bargain we can see the strict correlation between a capitalist social order and a subject who valorizes romance as the only form of love or connection. The price we pay for the capitalistic foreclosure of affection for others at large, for the institution of romantic love as we know it, is precisely that *intimacy itself* becomes reified and commodified (self-help, phone sex). What *The Family Man* reveals is not simply that the idea of love distracts us from alienation

but also that this very geography of love as outside the domain of capitalism perpetuates the horror of capitalism. If love is private, romantic, monogamous, then there can be no question of "humanizing" the economy, no notion of the state / market as providing for people, and certainly no political imaginary that conceives of struggle as a process of affective affiliation.

By emphasizing disconnection as the backbone of the capitalist libidinal economy, I do not suggest that the aim of the socialist revolution should be the realm of "total connection" (a kind of return to a collective womb in which all distances between individuals are cancelled). All social formations juggle the impossibility of their own wholeness. What I object to is the arc of that juggling under today's capitalism, the specific structural codependence between connection and disconnection that we witness in popular cultural representations of romantic love. A certain limited type of connection (the intimacy of private family life) is privileged as the result of the disconnection inherent in unjust distribution of resources. The aim of revolutionary intervention is not to generate a society of total connection / transparent organic unity, but radically to undermine the structural link between connection and disconnection that characterizes capitalist society. By way of abolishing alienating disconnection, revolutionary struggle should at the same time abolish the false primacy of private family intimacy, unfurling affinity to wider social dynamics.

## TO HAVE A CHOICE

How are we to break out of this closure in which the excess is not only contained within the system, but actively sustains it? There is no need to move to high social theory here: as befits the Alternate Reality category, an alternative mode of closure of the genre was released near the same time as *Family Man*. *Memento* does something unique: in staging the act of instituting the fantasy-frame that constitutes social reality, it confronts the domain of false (freedom of) choices with the repressed, traumatic Real of the primordial

choice. Its position is not simply "the freedom of choice is illusory, there is no true choice," but much more radical: the wealth of choices offered by late capitalism is a lure destined to obfuscate the dimension of the *true* choice, the "leap of faith" by means of which we accept the ideological coordinates of the existing system.

"*I have this condition . . .* " Periodic repetition lends these words the status of mantra for the hero of *Memento*, a release from Fetal Films. Leonard's mantra marks his suffering of the film's slogan: "Some memories are best forgotten." Having undergone a sudden trauma (the rape and murder of his wife), Leonard contracts a rare psychosomatic memory condition. He is unable to form new memories and has lost almost all short-term memory capacity, but retains long-term knowledge: he knows who he is, where he comes from, and what he does for a living. Upon waking each day, Leonard has to remind himself of his trauma and of his project to avenge it. He constructs an elaborate system of tattoos, notes, and photographs to organize his daily re-entrance into reality and familiarize himself with his progress in the search for the killer.

Each scene in the film is temporally prior to the scene that it diegetically follows. For example, a scene consists of Leonard parking his car, entering a restaurant, and having a conversation with his ambiguous companion, Teddy, but at the end of the conversation, when the next scene begins, Leonard is at the hotel, making a phone call, then driving to the restaurant, then parking his car . . . , thus concluding with the beginning of the scene before it. *Memento* therefore twists the standard Hollywood flashback narrative, in which a film begins at a certain crucial point, jumps to the beginning, works back to this point, and then proceeds to the end. The climax of the film capitalizes upon this reconfiguration, which is no simple stylistic innovation, but rather a calculated manipulation. A standard flashback narrative builds suspense while moving toward its own beginning, but *Memento* never stages the anticipated traumatic murder of the wife—the story never arrives at the crime scene, the true identity of the killer is never revealed.

The importance of *Memento* rests in this very tickling of the conventions of the flashback narrative form, which breeds a

fundamental undecidability of the surface story—Did Leonard kill his wife? / Is Teddy a cop or a psycho? / Did Leonard forget that he already avenged his wife? This ambiguity about the trauma ought to be read the way that Freud, in *die Traumdeutung*, reads ambiguity in dreams—when a patient associates that something is ambiguous about a dream ("either it was my mother, or it wasn't, it doesn't matter, it was just the background"), the task of the analyst is to read that ambiguity as an index of the complexity of the message (see Freud 1965). Here, ambiguity does not simply obfuscate the hidden message; it is (part of) the message itself. Facing the impulse to decide whether Leonard killed his wife, and the concomitant position of relegating the film to an exposition of the circumstances of one "lunatic," we should therefore pursue the repressed line of interpretation: it is *fundamentally irrelevant* whether he killed his wife, because *that* trauma is insignificant. Freud also emphasized the significance of ostensibly meaningless snippets—in representations of traumatic events, the true focus is something totally marginal. One of Freud's patients dreamed of a funeral that she had actually attended the previous day. She gleaned a sense of pleasure from the dream repetition of the funeral *not* because she had some secret motive of wishing the deceased to be dead but because one of her ex-lovers, who appeared briefly at the funeral and in the dream, aroused her. A similarly peripheral moment occurs in *Memento*, and it is in that moment that the story manifests its true focus: this is not a story about one man's particular actions, but about the (*traumatic*) *choice* that structures the whole of a person's life. At the true climax, Leonard makes a *single gesture* that effectively sets the coordinates of his future and sustains the consistency of his experience of reality.

The film's apex consists not in the spectacular, emotive staging of the traumatic murder, but in a scene utterly devoid of superficially traumatic aspects, in which Leonard sits in his car, sorting through his notes and photographs, and asks himself a question: "Can I make myself forget?" and answers it by printing a new instruction on the back of Teddy's photo: "Don't believe his lies." Leonard's decision is not provoked by the ambiguity of Teddy's role;

rather Leonard makes this radical choice in order to negate Teddy's expository narrative (of the crime and Leonard's own conduct in the aftermath)—a narrative whose truth value is irrelevant. This decision to disqualify all of Teddy's statements as lies enables Leonard to impose some order on his experience by constructing a secondary trauma (Teddy's rape and murder of his wife) as the decoy source of his activity. In this way, he imposes his "condition" on his conditions—or, to speak Hegelese, he decides to "posit" the very traumatic presuppositions of his activity. Confronted with Teddy's explanation, Leonard forces himself to forget it in order to sustain his fantasy: he has to actively make himself forget (what may or may not be) the truth, since it is only in this "condition" of nonmemory that he can maintain the framework that gives his life meaning: the search for the killer.

*Memento* thus substantiates the Lacanian position that fantasy is on the side of reality. Through depicting this operation for one particular man in one particular traumatic context, it tells the story of the universal predicament of subjectivity: fantasy is always required to sustain (our meaningful experience of) reality, because *reality itself is not self-evident.* When Leonard disavows Teddy's story, he explicitly chooses another story, and this choice, the installation of a fantasy, enables him to leap across the very chasm of meaning. Of course, the Freudian name for this radical choice is "primal repression," the process by means of which a relatively consistent symbolic field emerges from presymbolic chaos—but we should resist the temptation to rely upon a common psychoanalytic reading that appoints itself with a deceptive self-evidence (by means of his choice, Leonard endeavors to reconstitute his reality after a reality-shattering trauma). That sort of reading represents Leonard's radical choice as some universal existential predicament to which every subject is condemned in the great vacuum of Being. However, *Memento* offers a more specific articulation than this existential "leap of faith": Leonard's choice is more than an arbitrary resignification of reality, more than the institution of fantasy enabling him to cope with trauma's shattering impact. It is the choice that *regenerates the trauma itself.* In contrast to the standard

functioning of fantasy (the protective screen that enables the subject to domesticate the trauma), Leonard's choice retraumatizes the trauma—he must maintain this trauma in order to ground his otherwise non-sensical activity.

We witness here a radical deconstruction of the status of meaning in *The Family Man*: where Jack simply has to *discover* meaning, Leonard endeavors to *constitute* it. The ultimate difference between *The Family Man* and *Memento* is thus between the New Age universe in which some hidden meaning is always-already present (an "invisible hand" coordinates all events), and the universe of contingency that provokes a desperate struggle to impose meaning by means of gestures that are themselves contingent (collective social interventions "without guarantees"). *Memento* does not expressly narrate the repressed constitutive operation of ideology; by manipulating the conventional techniques of cinematic narrative, it rather solicits a dissonance between the formal anticipation of a climactic murder scene and the actual nodal point of the choice. As Lacan instructs, trauma fascinates us because it is always a lure for something else, always the mask of another trauma (1978, p. 68). In *Memento*, this substitution of the secondary trauma (the murder) for the primordial trauma (the choice), this elementary gesture of ideological narrative, fails. Through a series of cinematic codes (reverse narratives, etc.) the spectator is first lured into taking the bait of the diegetic trauma (the murder); however, the incongruity between the technical construction of an imaginary fullness of perspective (via continuity editing, tracking shots, shot-reverse shot, etc.)[2] and the dislodging of this omniscience by the undecidable content generates an "out-of-joint" sensation that prevents the total obfuscation of the true focal point of the film (the choice).

It is in this very production of disjuncture that *Memento*'s achievement transpires: instead of simply abandoning the conventional Hollywood narrative form, the film self-consciously relies

2. Regarding the ideological investment of cinematic conventions, see Mulvey (1992), Silverman (1992), and Modleski (1992).

upon conventional climactic formal structure in order to locate its own most important substantive point (the scene of choice). The film therefore deconstructs itself *from within*, mobilizing in the spectator the desire to decide whodunnit and, simultaneously, rendering this desire not only impossible to fulfill, but *false*, and as such, *irrelevant*. It is as if the spectator is forced to experience from within the disintegration of an ideological universe: the film's texture undermines its own explicit project.

Films mobilize in us a desire to know "what has happened here" and then generally gratify that desire through formal techniques (continuity editing, tracking shots, etc.) that affect narrative resolution. Our pleasure derives from our sense-making, what Fredric Jameson has called "the central function or instance of the human mind" (1981, p. 13). However, in *Memento*, the traumatic kernel is left completely open. Either Leonard killed her or he didn't; either he already avenged her death or he didn't; either he's evil or a victim. And it is this very insight into the irrelevance of the ostensible trauma (the murder) that makes it possible for the spectator to undo the displacement from the primary to the secondary trauma and to interrogate the true trauma, the repressed primal choice. This possibility of interrogation represents, I argue, one culmination of the alternate reality genre: the central fantasy of the genre is revealed. The difference between *Memento* and *The Family Man* resides in the difference between acknowledgment and obscene statement, between creating conditions of potential interrogation and spoonfeeding a prefabricated interrogation. While *Memento* dramatically explicates choice, *The Family Man* dramatically annihilates choice—both the potential of critical engagement and the very reality-instituting choice detailed above.

The kind of closure of interpretation produced in *The Family Man* contrasts with the possibilities for reading *Memento*, but this contrast is not a simple function of story. In *Memento*, a contradiction is located in its very form, that is, its story can only be told through the inconsistencies and ambiguities of the way it is told, whereas *The Family Man* locates what appears to be a contradiction in its content, as the tension between the two alternate realities,

and then resolves/annihilates this contradiction via the ideological movement from broad lack to specific lack. Where, on account of its formal contradiction, *Memento* remains open (it is just as possible to ignore the point of choice and read the film as a standard whodunnit, as to acknowledge the point of choice as the film's true climax), the very coherence of *The Family Man* depends upon a certain closure: the ideal spectator must be self-consciously alienated. The aperture / closure contrast here is no simple gauge of the authenticity/ideology contest, since, as stated above, openness can just as easily be ideologically driven. Instead, the subtlety we are witnessing is the spectacle of a hegemonic text that incorporates the very idea of critical distance toward an operation as *just another stage in the operation itself.*

## TO HAVE IT *NOT-ALL*

A brief detour through the Lacanian reading of the Kantian distinction between dynamic and mathematic antinomies may help us further to conceptualize the difference between *The Family Man* and *Memento*.[3] Kant outlines these antinomies to clarify the two modes of failure of reason to ground itself: each antinomy is composed of two statements that, taken simultaneously, are incompatible (1. the world is finite / 2. the world is infinite; 1. everything is subjected to natural laws / 2. there is a free will that is not subject to natural laws). Lacan (1998) implicitly refers to these antinomies in his articulation of the two formulas of sexuation. The dynamic antinomy displays the "masculine" structure: 1. there is an X that is excepted from / not subject to the phallic function; 2. all X are subject to the phallic function. In the terms that I have employed above, the dynamic antinomy is the concurrent articulation of a universal position and its exception/excess. By contrast, the mathematic antinomy displays the "feminine" structure: it holds

3. See Kant (1996). I rely here on formulations offered in three texts: Copjec (1994), Kordela (1999), and Žižek (1999).

that there is both no universality and no exception—there is no X that is not subject to the phallic function; *Not-All* X are subject to the phallic function. Again in my terms, although the system contains its own excess, although we cannot simply step out of it, *Not-All* of excess is subject to this containment.

It is my contention that the equilibrium of a system and its decoy excess displays the structure of the dynamic antinomy, while emphasis on the imbalance therein obeys the logic of the mathematical antinomy. Universal ideological propositions acquire their universality through containment of their inherent excess. We are all familiar with the quintessential capitalistic salvo, "Pull yourself up by your bootstraps!" A conventional leftist response, like a feminist voicing of particularity of women's concerns with regard to universal positions (women pull themselves under different conditions than men), may be highly effective in its particularity, but it fails to disrupt the hegemony of the universal position insofar as it participates in the continued silencing of the truth: *no one ever pulls themselves up by their bootstraps.* These leftist particularist responses to hegemonic universality remain within the domain of the dynamic antinomy: they either posit that the system is universal ("we are totally manipulated, no true opposition is possible today, everything is already in advance included in the game of the system") or that we have access to an exception ("true love allows us to assume a position outside the system"). These approaches fail to rupture the universality of the system by ignoring that the exception is a structural component of the system itself. To excise the bounds of the dynamic antinomy, one should endorse the mathematical one: nothing is simply outside the system, but nonetheless the system is not All-encompassing; it generates ambiguous phenomena that, also inherent to it, undermine it.

The opposition charted here between the antinomies (not just within them) may look more familiar when mapped onto the relationship among the universal, particular, and singular. The universal and the particular, although in mutual tension, are actually united in their shared exclusion of a third, singular/abject position. The dynamic antinomy is the concurrent articulation of the universal and

particular; the mathematic is the double negation of both the universal and the particular. To return to the case of love:

| UNIVERSAL | PARTICULAR | ABJECT |
| --- | --- | --- |
| all love is not political | some love is political | there is no love that is not political |

Let me first try to define the terms. By "politics," I do not mean a specific subsystem or level of the social totality, but a certain tension and openness that pervade the entire social field. There is politics because society is not a self-enclosed Whole, but rather an open field of the struggle for domination and hegemony; every relatively stable configuration is the result of this struggle. In this precise sense, politics does not reflect or express some more fundamental (say, economic) process: "class struggle" is the Marxist name for the fact that politics is operative in the very heart of economy. On the other hand, one should think "love" beyond the usual ideological opposites (love versus sexuality, the sublime agape /charity against erotic desire, or private love against the public sphere of market relations and power struggles): love designates the erotic charge invested in any social link. Here I follow the fundamental insight of psychoanalysis: every social link has to be sustained by some kind of libidinal investment; every social identification has an erotic component (see Freud 1959).

Disavowal of this truth is the very condition of possibility of the usual notion that the public sphere is exempted from libidinal investments—and it is this very repression that belies the ideological valence of the public–private divide. This repression is best formulated in the terms of dynamic antinomy of love: love as such is not political (universality), but some love is political (particularity).[4] First, love is repressed from the sphere of politics; then, a limited "return of the repressed" is allowed. The mathematic anti-

4. This dynamic antinomy closely corresponds to what Fredric Jameson develops as the "antinomies of postmodernity." See Jameson (1994).

nomy of love points toward the abject singularity that explodes this closure: there is nothing (no aspect of love) that is not caught within the system (no exception) but *Not-All* (of love) is within the system (no universality). Even as love is manipulated by/included in the system, it is not fully contained by it. Love under capitalism remains ambiguous; it retains a kernel of potential to undermine the system. And it is this very ambiguity of love (the fact that love is always a site of the struggle for hegemony) that renders it inherently political: whom we love, whom we do not love, how we love those whom we love are all the results of political decisions. To map the possibility of admitting this politics of intimacy:

| UNIVERSAL | PARTICULAR | ABJECT |
|---|---|---|
| public-private | public-private | never |
| always divide | sometimes unite | divide |

Confronted with the hegemonic (universal) assertion that subjectivity has nothing to do with economy, that our emotional lives are private and as such discrete from public dynamics, that our bodies may slave for the man but we are the master of our own desires, we might easily hasten to articulate a particular exception: sometimes our emotions have to do with our jobs, sometimes we love for money, sometimes personal preferences like racism erupt into the neutral field of the liberal system, sometimes people find political power sexy. Jack needs love to keep being a credit to capitalism. But just as in the example of the bootstraps, both of these formations (universal and particular) are merely different tactics for the same task: the point of fundamental convergence between the universal and the particular occurs in their mutual foreclosure of the abject true opposite. "Universal" and "particular" are here two modes of denial of the direct coincidence between libido and capital, between private and public, between subjectivity and economy. As subjects under capitalism, our identities, our feelings, and our urges are profoundly embedded in the structures of private ownership of means of production, exploitation of labor, and abjection of a permanent underclass. More than a simple base

determinism, this embeddedness, this integrality, this intricacy of intimacy and economy must be rather interpreted as a mutual constitution. The pseudoautonomy of identification (processes and mechanisms of forming and sustaining selves) and capitalization (processes and mechanisms by which capitalism forms and sustains itself) must be exposed.

It is only against this formulation that we can assess the gesture of *The Family Man*: just like the dynamic antinomy, the film consolidates within one textual operation the hegemonic position and the particular exception. Rather than reading this consolidation as the colonization of critique (*The Family Man* co-opts the standard critical gesture of highlighting particular exceptions; the system interpellates an alienated subject and is therefore total), we have to insist here on a rigorous extrication of true critique from false critique. *The Family Man* unwittingly creates the conditions under which it is possible to do so, to read the standard critical/counterideological gesture of voicing particularity as systemically overdetermined. True and false critique are not aligned as simple antipodes, because the system has intervened in such a contrast through positing its own (false) version of the true, which, consequently, is to be distinguished from the "true" true one. In *The Family Man*, for example, the false-true is the notion of love as the authentic antidote to alienation. What may have been a contradiction of two terms (true/false or particular/universal) has therefore passed to a tension among three (false/false-true/true-true or universal/particular/abject).

To be sure, *The Family Man* evidences the viral colonialism of ideology, but we must interpret this expansion as a *necessary territorial exaggeration*. When an ideology is increasingly explicit about its own ideological status, the very appearance of success of ideological functioning ("even criticism is now the province of ideology") *bespeaks its own fissures*. Indeed, the hegemonic articulation of love inadvertently reveals that our contemporary present rests on the seismic fault line of authentic love, the threat of collective gestures that might reconstitute the fates of hungry children, shelterless bodies, exploited capacities, dominated souls, and subju-

gated minds. The channeling of the love force by hegemonic forces is therefore imperative, as the order of things relies upon our continued geography of love as a private movement. In other words, the spectacle of widespread ideological galvanization of "love" demonstrates neither the irrelevance of love under capitalism nor the simple insidiousness of ideology in allegedly extra-ideological strata of everyday life; on the contrary, this strategic manipulation reveals the key role love plays for this mode of production. Facing the universal tendency to accept the positing of the decoy excess and its decoy containment, we should receive the unconscious communication and realize the threat of noncontainment of the true excess. Our love is not private—it is the very precondition of publicity as we know it. The inevitable truth of this codependence of the system and the subject is that new modes of subjectivity can shift the system.[5] As the ground of capitalism, love challenges as much as it secures.

Ultimately this is what is meant by Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) notion that hegemony is a "war of contents": since the institution of power takes form in our *love*, it is our task as *lovers* to defraud the hegemonic investments in our (inter)subjectivities. The words of Che Guevara ("Let me say, at the risk of sounding ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love") remind us that authentic love is a revolutionary force that bears no connection to humanitarianism. Che's dictum on love was followed by an exposition of hate, in the proper political sense—he partook of executions for the cause. The idea of "great feelings of love" guiding a revolutionary has nothing to do with grandiose benevolence for "the masses" or "mankind" and everything to do with the sophisticated understanding that revolution and critical struggle come into being as such through energetic, erotic collectivity—precisely the sort of connection that feels itself severed by capitalism. Or, to try the reverse of the first formula:

5. See here the formations of ambiguity in Butler (1997).

| UNIVERSAL | PARTICULAR | ABJECT |
| --- | --- | --- |
| all politics are not love | some politics are love | there are no politics that are not love |

Here, the universal position marks the place of liberal ideology (the public and private realms are distinct; the state is an abstract external order that certainly influences daily life but has nothing whatsoever to do with my innermost feelings), while the particular position is that of fascism (some politics are effective when passion for an ethos is so strategically mobilized that it easily transfers to unquestioned devotion for a supremely lovable leader), and the abject is that of the revolutionary (not only are true revolutionaries guided by great feelings of love, but all politics manifest libidinal designations).

The capitalistic romance of *The Family Man* must be distinguished from an, as it were, "alternate" instantiation of love. But what are the coordinates of this alternate? The alternative to capitalist romantic love is precisely *not* humanitarian love, for these positions are directly correlative: the privatization of love as a force gives rise to a narcissistic demonstration of abundance—I have so much love that I can even spare some on You. Humanitarian acts supplement the satisfaction of the private order. Instead, I assert that the true opposite of the humanitarian sentiment (we help those who need us because it makes us human) is the conviction that *we have to help people because it's wrong that they need our help.*

What sort of love galvanizes this conviction? A passionate commitment that people need each other to develop and grow but that any given person's opportunity to develop and grow should not be marred by need. A sense of joy derived from intersubjectivity, a sense of energy sparked by collectivity, a sense of support gleaned from your neighbors. A rolling forward, a movement that is its own reason to move that is not "falling" but "building." David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) concludes with a scene of this political love: a couple holding hands, framed against fiery explosions ignited by anticorporate militants. The crucial assertion of the scene is that

there is *even a kind of erotic love that fortifies political projects*, catalyzes political imagination, and in turn finds new affective excitement in political accomplishments. The "erotic" here is not an instrumentalist emphasis on sex that defies romance, but a dynamic configuration that forswears stasis. Love is not about completion, about soothing the alienation of an established order so that life can more pleasantly coincide with the system, but rather about inspiration, about stimulating the imagination of a radically different order, where there is neither scarcity nor shallowness of social connection.

Perhaps the only demarcation of revolutionary love against love qua the salve of capitalism is the choice to say "Hi." For no other normative distinctions are useful: revolutionary love is not necessarily the end of monogamy, nor is it inevitably the demise of romance. Politicized love doesn't have to be cold, calculating, or generic. The only aim of these preliminary blueprints is simply to debunk those very erotic attachments that are fueled by social disconnect. In the perennial war of contents, the fighting stance here is the leap from that kind of love that is the motor oil of the system to that other love, which is sugar in its gas tank.

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# 6

# *Fighting Our Fantasies:* Dark City *and the Politics of Psychoanalysis*

TODD McGOWAN

At the 1999 inaugural meeting of the American-Lacanian Link, Fredric Jameson, in his response to a talk by Slavoj Žižek, questioned Žižek about the connection between contemporary Lacanian analyses of culture and political action. According to Jameson, while Žižek constantly implies that a relationship does exist between the two, a concrete delineation of the nature of this relationship seems conspicuously absent from his work and the work of fellow Lacanian theorists. This absence, for Jameson, is not cause for dismissing psychoanalysis: he clearly sees Žižek as one of Marxism's fellow travelers, but he also sees in Žižek's work psychoanalytic cultural critique that seems to proceed at the expense of socio-economic or political analysis.[1] What Jameson sought with his question was a way of bridging this seeming divide. In a different

1. Jameson's receptivity to Lacanian psychoanalysis goes back a long way. In fact, at a time when most American critics had accepted many erroneous assumptions about Lacan, Jameson wrote a lucid exploration of Lacan's importance that remains timely even today.

dialogue with Žižek in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, both Judith Butler (2000) and Ernesto Laclau (2000) draw attention to this same apparent disconnection. Butler points out that Žižek, though he discusses both Lacan and Marx, "never quite gets around to asking how they might be thought—or rethought—together" (p. 139).[2] The fundamental lacuna in Žižek's thought (and in contemporary Lacanian theory), according to these responses, is the bridge between recognition and action, between the psychoanalytic critique of ideology and a political program. While psychoanalytic interpretation and critique allow individuals to recognize the functioning of ideology and even the role that their private fantasies play within ideology, they do nothing to help them act politically as part of a larger group. In fact, psychoanalysis seems to be constantly undermining the possibility of collective action by exposing the dynamics of group identification and its dependence on fantasy. How might contemporary Lacanian theory answer this charge? How do we marry a psychoanalytic critique of ideology to concrete political action?

In his own responses to this line of criticism, Žižek himself always insists on the identity of psychoanalysis and politics. He claims that psychoanalysis demands the political Act—the traversal of the fantasy, the fantasy that keeps subjects within the hold of ideology. The problem with this response, from the Marxist perspective, is that it seems to establish a very individualistic conception of politics. Traversing the fantasy—the end of analysis—seems to be something that occurs only on the level of the individual. It may provide freedom for the individual, but this freedom exists, according to Marxism, within the larger unfreedom of capitalist society. Historically, this has been the problem with psychoanaly-

2. Laclau formulates a critique very close to Butler's: "Žižek's political thought suffers from a certain 'combined and uneven development.' While his Lacanian tools, together with his insight, have allowed him to make considerable advances in the understanding of ideological processes in contemporary societies, his strictly political thought has not advanced at the same pace, and remains fixed in very traditional categories" (2000, p. 206).

sis for Marxism: it works for the satisfaction of the individual, not the whole. And one of the fundamental tenets of Marxism is that this very distinction is false, that one cannot separate the individual from the whole.[3] Not coincidentally, however, this is precisely what Lacan says in his discussion of the ethical dimension of psychoanalysis. In *Seminar VII*, he puts this directly into Marxist terminology: "There is no satisfaction for the individual outside of the satisfaction of all" (1992, p. 292).[4] This is a point Žižek echoes as well. In psychoanalytic terms, there is no difference between the individual act and the collective act because any individual act necessarily has collective implications. The individual act of traversing the fantasy and freeing oneself from symbolic or ideological constraints is at the same time a political act. That is to say, when an individual authentically acts, this act fundamentally transforms existing social arrangements and thus has a collective import. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Alex Proyas's *Dark City* (1998), a film that illustrates the unity of the psychoanalytic process and political action in an almost unequaled way.

*Dark City* depicts a city where an alien race (the Strangers), situated underground, controls the inhabitants of the city. They exercise this control through a nightly process of what they call "tuning"—using their mental power in order to rearrange the physical layout of the entire city. In addition, with the help of the one human they have recruited to assist them (Dr. Daniel Paul Schreber

3. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx makes clear that his efforts at historicizing the capitalist mode of production have as their aim breaking down capitalist ideology's false insistence on this division. According to Marx, historicizing capitalism allows us to see the dependence of every individual on the collective. He claims, "The more deeply we go back into history, the more deeply does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole" (1993, p. 84).

4. In his seminar on the transference, Lacan further insists on the falsity of the distinction between the individual and the collective. Telling his listeners that this is "the confirmation of what I always tell you," Lacan claims, "in relation to the universal, the individual and the collective are one and the same level. What is true on the level of the individual . . . is also true on the level of the collective" (1991, p. 427, my translation).

[Kiefer Sutherland]), they inject new identities into certain humans during the physical rearrangement of the society. Every night, the city and its people undergo a dramatic transformation. The goal of these transformations, according to the Strangers, is the discovery of the human soul—that which exceeds symbolic identity and gives humanity its humanity. They search, to put it in Lacan's terms, for the *objet petit a* of humanity, what is in humanity more than humanity. By constantly changing the symbolic identities of the humans, the Strangers hope to find out what stays the same and what is thus irreducible in the human subject. The film opens with the nightly transformation going awry: one human subject, John Murdoch (Rufus Sewell), wakes up before the process is complete, before his new identity has been wholly established. Throughout the remainder of the film, Murdoch gradually uncovers the (ideological) manipulation performed by the Strangers and eventually defeats them, breaking their hold over the city. Murdoch's individual act of freeing himself from the ideological hold of the Strangers has the effect of freeing the entire society from their control as well. This freedom depends upon a strictly psychoanalytic act: Murdoch must traverse his own fantasy and encounter a traumatic Real in order to break the power of the Strangers. In this way, *Dark City* demonstrates the strict correspondence between the psychoanalytic process and political action.

Throughout most of the film, Proyas emphasizes that the barrier that stands in the way of an authentic political act is the ideological control established by symbolic authority. The Strangers function as the source of this authority in the film insofar as they create the world of meaning in which the people of the city exist. They supply all the signification for these subjects and thus have ideological control over them. In this sense, it is important that the leader of the Strangers is named Mr. Book (Ian Richardson). The name is appropriate because the fundamental act of the Strangers takes place on the level of the signifier: they provide the foundation for all signification and, in this way, create the world of meaning in *Dark City*. In the act of providing signification, the Strangers allow something to emerge out of nothing, which is the

precise function of symbolic authority. They are the source of the world depicted in the film. At the beginning of the film, Schreber, as he begins his narration, offers an account of this creation. He says, "First there was darkness. Then came the Strangers." As Schreber's account indicates, prior to the Strangers and the onset of their symbolic universe, there were no distinctions; all was "darkness."

The onset of signification changes everything, eliminating all traces of what existed prior to it. Symbolic power is first and foremost the power to determine the past—to write its prehistory in its own terms, thereby completely obfuscating it. This is why none of the characters in *Dark City* can remember what it was like prior to the arrival of the Strangers. As Schreber explains the Strangers to Inspector Bumstead (William Hurt), he stresses this limitation on the thought of the city's population:

> *Bumstead*: You say they brought us here. From where?
> *Schreber*: I don't remember. None of us remember that. What we once were, what we might have been. Somewhere else.

There was, of course, a time prior to the creation of the symbolic universe of the Strangers, but after that moment of creation, it becomes completely inaccessible. This inaccessibility of what is prior to it characterizes any and every symbolic structure. One cannot think about this past except through the lens of the present symbolic universe. This is one of the ways in which symbolic authority establishes its power over subjects: if subjects cannot conceive of a past prior to the present symbolic configuration, it becomes almost impossible to conceive of an alternative future as well. As the authors of the symbolic universe of the city, the Strangers have ideological control over it. In the figures of the Strangers, Alex Proyas personifies the forces of ideological control in order to make clearer how this control functions.

By depicting the Strangers manipulating and controlling the inhabitants of the city, the film offers us insight into the functioning of ideology. The Strangers and their "tuning" make explicit the way that ideology shapes social arrangements: the very physical

organization of the city depends on an underlying ideology that produces all of the distinctions that define the society. Each night, the Strangers rearrange houses, redirect roads, and move wealth around, creating a whole new world. Subjects awaken unknowingly from a brief sleep to find their world utterly transformed (though they remain unaware that anything has ever been different). In a telling instance of the way that the tuning functions like ideology, Murdoch witnesses a family home undergoing a radical makeover. Their modest house, furniture, and clothing all become opulent; through the agency of the Strangers, wealth "magically" appears in every aspect of their environment. The family's wealth is solely a result of the tuning, the whim of the Strangers who control the social arrangements of the city. Here we see firsthand the power of ideology to determine the distribution of wealth. Wealth has nothing to do with the "hard work" of the family; instead, it results from the very way in which the Strangers arrange and rearrange the social order. And yet, the family members themselves remain completely unaware that their wealth results from the activity of the Strangers. They act as if—and believe that—they have "earned" their economic and social position in their world. By showing this transformation, the film offers a view of ideology inaccessible to us in our everyday experience, just as it is inaccessible to the members of this family. Ordinarily, we can't see the ideological forces that construct society at work, but in *Dark City* we can because they are manifested in the form of the Strangers. The mechanism of tuning makes evident the power of ideology over everything that we see.

But ideology penetrates even further, as the nightly injections of memories into the heads of the city's inhabitants suggest. Ideology not only controls what subjects see, but, even more importantly, the position from which they see it. It provides subjects with their symbolic identities—even the most intimate and cherished memories that make up these identities. In *Dark City*, the process of supplying identity accompanies the nightly tuning. As Schreber explains to Murdoch and Bumstead, "They [the Strangers] mix and match our memories as they see fit, trying to divine what makes

us unique. One day a man might be an inspector, the next someone entirely different." Clearly, in the "real world" experience of ideology, this kind of arbitrary identity swapping doesn't actually occur. We experience a degree of consistency between past and present. But the inclusion of these identity shifts in the film suggests the role that ideology does have in forming the way subjects relate to their past experience. Ideology is constantly reinterpreting the past, placing it within a new interpretive framework. That is to say, ideological revolutions do not simply change the way we relate to present events but also the way we relate to past ones. Ideology prompts us to see the past as the prelude to an inevitable present rather than as a time pregnant with other possibilities, possibilities that might challenge current ideological structures.[5]

The relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union in the 1980s provides an illustration of ideology's proclivity to rewrite the past, to create new memories (to put it in the terms of *Dark City*). During the mid-1980s, the United States viewed the Soviet Union as a thriving superpower and experienced its actions in this light. From this perspective, the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev represented an updating of the Soviet system, transforming it into an increasingly viable alternative, a Communism for the postmodern world. In the aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, however, this view of Gorbachev has completely changed. Now, we see his reforms as a last attempt to save the dying superpower. Instead of being the indication of the health of the Soviet system, they become the sign of its inevitable decline. In this way, an ideological shift—the end of Communism—completely transforms the past as it transforms the present. We can see the same thing at work in a filmic example by looking at the development of love relationships in Rob Reiner's *When Harry Met Sally* (1989). At different points interspersed throughout the film, various

5. This is the point that Walter Benjamin insists on in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History." For Benjamin, the task of the Marxist philosopher involves reactivating the forgotten possibilities of the past that contemporary ideology obscures.

couples describe their romances—their initial meeting and then the point at which they fell in love. In these romantic narratives, they inevitably describe the initial meeting as a prelude to the love that would follow when they met again. Often, however, this later meeting results from some contingent event, and we could as easily imagine it not occurring. But this subsequent event—the moment of falling in love—is crucial to the description of the initial meeting. This event and the ideology of romantic love retroactively change the initial meeting into a prelude to love. In the actual experience of that initial meeting, the lovers of course felt some attraction, but this is an experience they undoubtedly had many times. It is only the later bond that gives the first event its unique quality, resulting in statements such as "I knew right away that she was the one," and so forth. Hence, if the subsequent meeting did not occur, she would not have been the one. The marriage represents an ideological revolution that re-creates the past, changing a moment of attraction into a prelude to love (or even "love at first sight"). Things work the same way during the nightly transformations in *Dark City*. The basic function of ideology, as the Strangers recognize, concerns the past rather than the present.[6] It works to define the past solely in the terms of the present. This is because the past—a time when things were different—represents a greater danger to symbolic authority than the present itself. If we remember a past when things were different, it is easier to act politically to create a different future.[7]

In addition to making it difficult to think of an alternative future, the ideological rewriting of the past establishes a continu-

6. *Dark City* is, of course, not the only science fiction film to depict metaphorically ideology's ability to rewrite the past. This is also the primary theme of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). In that film, the replicants, who have memories implanted at the time of their creation, represent human subjects, relating to a past that has been retroactively posited for them. For a further elaboration of this conception of ideology, see also Paul Verhoeven's *Total Recall* (1990).

7. This is why one of the main efforts of capitalist ideology consists in proclaiming that human societies have always been (more or less) capitalistic in their basic structure. If we believe that capitalism has always been around, we will inevitably also believe that it always will be.

ity between past and present—a sense that the present has emerged smoothly and necessarily out of the past. This continuity serves as a crucial support for the present configuration of society. The image of a past that leads to the present renders subjects less apt to question the structure of the present. As a product of the past, it seems to be the natural, inevitable, and proper state of things. In this way, images and memories of the past serve as *the* ideological justification of the present. The Strangers' control of memory thus represents the apogee of the functioning of ideology.

The problem with this depiction of ideology in the form of the Strangers is, of course, that it represents—as is pervasive within science fiction—a paranoid conception of ideological control. It assumes that behind the false, ideological big Other, there lies a true Other, an Other of the Other. The Strangers play the part of this Other of the Other: they exist behind the scenes, manipulating ideology to advance their own interests. By assuming an Other of the Other, paranoia misses the essentially posited nature of ideology. Ideology is effective not because someone sits behind the scenes pulling the strings, but because subjects posit ideology as having an actual existence. Ideology works to control subjects because subjects believe in it as something substantive; this subjective investment keeps it working. Subjects under the sway of an ideology believe that it is not just ideology but rather rooted in the exigencies of the real. They believe, for instance, that capitalism has its basis in the eternal laws of human nature. This belief on the part of subjects allows capitalist ideology to retain its hold over them. That is to say, the subject—and not an Other behind the scenes—provides the key to the functioning of ideology. By placing the Strangers in the position of the Other of the Other, by succumbing to paranoia, *Dark City* obscures the role of the subject in the perpetuation of ideology, which diffuses the film's otherwise salient exposition of the way ideology functions.

Before holding this paranoia against the film, however, we should note how *Dark City* attests to its own paranoid structure. By naming the narrator of the film "Dr. Daniel Paul Schreber," Proyas foregrounds an allusion to the famous turn-of-the-century

psychotic, author of a noted memoir of psychosis and the subject of Freud's most detailed discussion of paranoia and psychosis.[8] It is Schreber, not Murdoch, who knows about the Strangers and their manipulation of the city from the beginning. He sees through the guises of ideology, to the Other of the Other at the source of these guises. Schreber's is the paranoia that undermines the film's critique of ideology, and yet because the name "Schreber" is attached to it, this very fact serves as a kind of confession. The name "Schreber" reveals that the film is aware of its own paranoia at the same time as it perpetuates this paranoia. But this raises an obvious question: If Proyas realizes the paranoia inherent in this depiction of the Strangers, why does he insist on depicting them in this way?

Answering this question takes us beyond *Dark City* and to the very nature of the filmic image itself. *Dark City* resorts to paranoia not because of a failure of imagination. On the contrary, its inability to imagine the critique of ideology without assuming an Other of the Other is not a defect that one might rectify. Instead, this "defect" is the very thing that makes possible the critique of ideology that the film authors. We cannot have one without the other. By personifying symbolic authority in the Strangers, *Dark City* allows us to see the workings of ideology in a way that would otherwise be impossible. This paranoid view of things is necessary because the film aims at presenting an *image* of ideological control, and ideological control is a symbolic, rather than an imaginary, process. In the act of specularizing ideology, *Dark City*—and all films that attempt this—fails to capture its "headless" character, the fact that there is no one pulling the strings. This occurs because an image cannot convey this central absence but necessarily transforms it into a presence. Unlike symbols, images are always present; they don't convey absence. Hence, in the image of ideology, there is always and necessarily an agent involved. The one difference between *Dark City* and other paranoid films of this type—*Blade Runner*, *The Matrix*, and so on—lies in its attempt to draw attention to

8. For an explanation of the film in terms of Schreber's psychosis, see Showalter (1998).

this paranoia by having Schreber, the noted paranoiac, narrate the film. By foregrounding its own paranoia, the film alerts us to the exigencies of any filmic—which is to say, imaginary—critique of ideology. While this critique cannot fully distance itself from paranoia, it does have the virtue of exposing the weaknesses of ideology, in addition to its strengths.[9]

For all its ability to control both past and present, the power of ideology is not absolute. We have political possibilities because ideology does not function smoothly. The hitches in its functioning mark the points at which subjects can mount resistance, and psychoanalytic interpretation allows us to recognize such points. As we have already seen, *Dark City* begins with a moment at which ideological control fails. It fails because, as Detective Eddie Walenski (Colin Friels) later tells Murdoch, "Once in a while one of us wakes up while they're changing things. It's not supposed to happen, but it does. It happened to me." It also happens to Murdoch at the beginning of the film. During the process of tuning and the imprinting of memories, Murdoch wakes up before

9. Whereas films of the 1970s employed paranoia to illustrate the invulnerability of ideology, the paranoid films of the 1990s share an opposite aim: they use paranoia to display the weaknesses of ideological control. The two greatest paranoid films of the 1970s, Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974) and Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), both depict an ideology so airtight that it is impervious to assault. In *The Parallax View*, the secret of a political assassination dies with Joseph Frady (Warren Beatty), indicating the total victory of the forces of symbolic authority. With his death, they successfully eliminate all traces of their manipulation and thus cement their control over American society. *Three Days of the Condor* is more ambiguous, but in the final line of the film, CIA operative Higgins (Cliff Robertson) suggests that the organization will prevent *The New York Times* from printing Joe Turner's (Robert Redford) attempt to expose a CIA-directed conspiracy. Both films imply that ideology has the ability to suppress all challenges to its hegemony. Because these films imagine an Other of the Other secretly controlling everything that happens, there is no possibility for an ideological crisis or collapse. In the 1990s, paranoid films such as *Dark City* and Andy and Larry Wachowski's *The Matrix* (1999) also assume an Other of the Other behind the scenes. But because they fully characterize this Other (rather than leaving it amorphous, as in the 1970s films), it becomes vulnerable, and this vulnerability allows us to see the weaknesses of ideology.

Schreber has successfully imprinted his new identity. As a result, Murdoch doesn't know who he is; he has only fragments of memories. To "wake up" means that one has become aware of the process of ideological interpellation and has grasped that ideology produces identity. And in contrast, to sleep is to acquiesce to ideological control. This is why, during another tuning later in the film, Murdoch frantically exhorts those around him to wake up so that they too can become aware of the control being exerted over them. In order to resist ideological control, the first step is to become aware of its functioning, which Murdoch does.

Ideology is susceptible to this kind of awareness—and to failure—because the symbolic authority is itself incomplete. It suffers from lack just like the subjects under its control. That is to say, symbolic authority does not simply exert its power over subjects; it also wants something from them. In *Dark City*, the figures of symbolic authority (the Strangers) seek the human soul, the source of human individuality. Schreber points out that they believe human individuality will save them—a collective species—from death. He explains to Murdoch, "It is our capacity for individuality, our souls, that makes us different from them. They think they can find the human soul if they understand how our memories work. All they have are collective memories. They share one group mind. They're dying, you see. Their entire race is on the brink of extinction. They think we can save them."[10] The Strangers rep-

10. Though the idea of a collective race is a commonplace of science fiction, it achieves its apotheosis in the depiction of the Borg in *Star Trek*. What at first seems so menacing about the Borg is their complete lack of desire: they appear to be pure death drive, not haunted by a lack. Without desire, the Borg appear to be impervious to any kind of assault. But in every sustained human encounter with the Borg, a sense of lack—desire—inevitably becomes apparent. Discovering and attacking this lack becomes the key for humans to defeat the Borg. For instance, in Jonathan's Frakes's *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996) it is the desire of the Borg Queen (Alice Krige) for Data (Brent Spiner) that leads to the undoing of the Borg plans for control of the Earth. The salient point here is that it is impossible even to imagine an authority that is completely effective in controlling subjects: In order to have an *effect* on subjects, authority—and ideology—must have a point of opening at which they can enter into it. Without

resent the symbolic authority in the film, and yet they themselves desire. They want to discover the hidden secret of humanity—the *objet petit a*, the kernel of jouissance, within the human subject. They take a special interest in Murdoch precisely because the process of ideological control fails with him, and thus he seems to possess this kernel of jouissance that cannot be reduced to ideology. What they seek in humans is not successful ideological control, but the ability to resist it.

Through this depiction of the Strangers, *Dark City* reveals not only that symbolic authority desires (i.e., that it is lacking and therefore not absolute), but also that it desires the very jouissance that it forbids. Symbolic authority demands obedience, but it desires resistance—the kernel of jouissance in the subject that cannot be assimilated through ideology. Its desire cannot be reduced to a demand: authority articulates its demand—"Obey the Law!"—but its desire appears between the lines of the demand. As Lacan (1966–1967) points out in his *Seminar XIV* entitled *La logique du fantasme*, "it is from the demand—and thoroughly from the demand—that desire arises" (1966–1967, session of June 21, 1967). It is, Lacan adds, "only a by-product of the demand" (1966–1967, session of June 21, 1967). Because desire emerges from demand, it remains—in direct contrast to demand—fundamentally enigmatic and irreducible to any positive realization in signifiers. According to Lacan (1989), desire "cannot be indicated anywhere in a signifier of any demand whatsoever, since it is not articulatable there even though it is articulated in it" (p. 62). Unlike demand, desire is elusive: whenever it is made completely articulate, it slips away. So while the Strangers demand that the city's human subjects succumb to their manipulation, what they really want—what they desire—is to discover someone who will successfully resist. Resistance indicates the presence of the "soul" or *objet petit a*, that extimate part of the subject—what is in the subject more than

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this opening for the subject, without this lack, the authority cannot induce subjects to succumb, and it thus remains ineffectual insofar as it is wholly dependent on force for its control.

the subject—that remains the same despite constant changes in symbolic identity. All mastery is constrained and haunted by the desire for this little piece of the Real that has the ability to completely topple its authority.

It seems odd, of course, to say that mastery wants subversion rather than obedience. But this results from the fact that the position of mastery is itself split and therefore inconsistent. This desire of the master is evident in the paternal figure who favors the rebellious son over the dutiful one, as in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Big Daddy, the father of the family depicted in the play, clearly prefers his son Brick over his other son Gooper, despite the rebellion of the former and the obedience of the latter. Gooper is a successful lawyer, and he takes care of the family estate. In addition, he has a stable marriage and has fathered grandchildren for Big Daddy. Gooper has done all of these things in order to please Big Daddy, to conform to his demand. Brick drinks, disdains his inheritance, has a rapidly dissolving marriage, and, perhaps most significantly, has sexual desire for men rather than women. However, even the revelation of Brick's attraction to men does not alter Big Daddy's preference for him; in fact, it seems to increase it.[11] The more Brick acts against Big Daddy's demand, the more Big Daddy desires him. Brick's resistance to Big Daddy's authority attracts Big Daddy's desire because it indicates the presence of the *objet petit a*—something that absolutely resists assimilation to the demands of authority. Big Daddy, like the Strangers, seeks out this object that seems to hold the secret

11. When Brick tells Big Daddy about his relationship with Skipper (and Big Daddy infers its homosexual nature), Big Daddy's response indicates the extent of his desire for Brick. Though Big Daddy is a Southern patriarch, a figure of oversized hypermasculinity (as is especially evident in the film version of the play, with Burl Ives playing the part), he does not respond in the way we would expect from this kind of man. Rather than chiding Brick for his failure to be a "real man," Big Daddy assures Brick that his overriding virtue has always been tolerance. The incongruity of someone named "Big Daddy" preaching tolerance of homosexuality attests to the extent of his desire for Brick's love.

of jouissance that always remains just outside the reach of those in power. Symbolic authority's lack constitutes a political opening for the subject, which is why the subject must constantly remain aware of it.

In addition to revealing the desire of symbolic authority, *Dark City* also illustrates the inability of symbolic authority to experience jouissance. Perhaps the Strangers experience some jouissance in their mastery, but sexual jouissance completely escapes them. This failing becomes apparent in an exchange between Schreber and one of the Strangers. While Schreber works in his lab preparing a new identity for a human subject, a Stranger approaches Schreber as the latter begins to reflect on one of the memories he puts into this identity: "What is it? The recollections of a great lover? A catalogue of conquests? We will soon find out. You wouldn't appreciate that, Mr. Whatever-your-name-is. Not the sort of conquests you would ever understand." Schreber's comment here underlines the distinction between mastery and jouissance. Because they occupy the position of mastery, the Strangers continually seek the jouissance that their very position denies to them. This is the fundamental impasse of all mastery: not only does it need those it controls and subjects to sustain its own position of mastery, but it cannot escape being obsessed with the secret jouissance of these subjects. Hence, in addition to leaving open the space for resistance, symbolic authority actually encourages its own subversion.

Through its depiction of the desire of symbolic authority, *Dark City* reveals one of the ways that psychoanalytic critique and psychoanalytically informed inquiry serve political action. Often, the strongest barrier to overcome in the political act is the belief that symbolic authority is without fissure, that there is no opening in which the act can occur. By showing the Strangers' desperate search for the jouissance of the subject, the film shatters this belief. Rather than embodying an invariable mastery that thwarts all challenges to it, the Strangers betray the inconsistency of mastery, its lack. And because even symbolic authority lacks, we need not succumb

to its demands.[12] Symbolic authority's lack creates the space at which we can oppose it, and taking up this opposition is what it means to act politically. But the primary barrier to such an act is our investment in the fantasy that fills in symbolic authority's lack.

Because symbolic authority is lacking or split, ideological control is not absolute. This means that it needs a fantasmatic support in order to entice subjects to buy into it. If ideology simply demands submission, subjects will be reluctant to buy into it. But fantasy fills in this lacuna, offering a reward (an image of the ultimate jouissance) that ideology offers in exchange for submission. Hence, far from subverting ideological control, fantasy perpetuates it and follows from it. The Strangers provide the inhabitants of the city with fantasies—images of an experience beyond ideological control—and these fantasies assist in rendering the people docile. In the case of Murdoch, we see clearly how ideological control depends on a fundamental fantasy. For Murdoch, this fantasy is that of Shell Beach, a place of warmth and light in contrast to the dark, dreary city. Shell Beach occupies this important place in Murdoch's psychic economy because it represents his point of origin—home. He believes that if he can return to this point, he will find the answers to all of his questions about his identity and gain a sense of completion.

The contrast between the social reality of *Dark City* and Murdoch's fantasy reveals the crucial role that fantasy plays in keeping subjects satisfied with the social reality as it is. Murdoch and everyone else in the city live in perpetual darkness—a hopeless world of unending night. Proyas emphasizes this absence of light in the different aspects of the film's mise-en-scène. Every setting within the city is very dimly lit; the characters wear dark col-

12. The Strangers' reliance on Schreber also indicates this lack—and hence the weakness of symbolic authority. They are unable to create without at least one human subject to serve as the "artist." Despite their ability to control humans, as Schreber puts it, "they still needed an artist to help them." Again, this attests to the lack of jouissance in symbolic authority. Without jouissance, there is no art, no act of creation—and thus symbolic authority must constantly rely on the subject for every act of creation.

ors and often appear in shadow; and no scene takes place during the day. This world would seem to be conducive to widespread dissatisfaction, but fantasy intervenes to foster contentment through an imaginary satisfaction. Fantasy allows subjects to take solace in the image of past (and future) satisfaction. Whereas the social reality is dark and hopeless, fantasy presents a world brimming with light. In Murdoch's fantasmatic image of Shell Beach, a bright sun shines on a beautiful shoreline. This fantasy seems to offer an opening to a point beyond ideological control—hope for a different future—but ideology actually relies on this image of an opening in order to keep subjects satisfied with their existence within ideology.

In order for fantasy to supplement ideology in this way, it must remain amorphous and unarticulated. On several occasions during the film, Murdoch asks about the way to Shell Beach. But each time his interlocutors stumble in mid-sentence, despite expressing certainty about their knowledge of the directions. An exemplary instance of this occurs when Murdoch questions a cab driver:

> *Murdoch*: Hey, do you happen to know the way to Shell Beach?
> *Cab Driver*: You're kidding. Me and the Mrs. spent our honeymoon there. . . . All you gotta do is take Main Street west to . . . or is the Cross—. . . that's funny, I can't seem to remember if it's Main Street west or the Crosstown.

This initial feeling of knowledge and the subsequent uncertainty clue us in to the fantasmatic status of Shell Beach. Because it functions as the locale of fantasy, subjects feel as if they know it intimately. But because it is fantasmatic, they cannot put this "knowledge" into words. In *Seminar VII*, Lacan points out that "fantasms cannot bear the revelation of speech" (1992, p. 80). To articulate the fantasy—to give directions to Shell Beach—would destroy it insofar as this would expose the imaginary status of the fantasy scenario.

By stressing the inability of other subjects to tell Murdoch the way to Shell Beach, the film again insists on the link between the individual's relationship to his or her private fantasies and the

political situation of the entire society. Even though Murdoch's fantasy is individual and private—Shell Beach is not the fantasy of everyone in the city—other inhabitants assist him in sustaining the fantasmatic status of Shell Beach through their failure to direct him to it. In other words, their silence allows Murdoch to sustain distance from his fantasy. The fantasy of Shell Beach continues to hold sway over Murdoch in part because everyone shows such respect for this private fantasy. The subjects of *Dark City* unconsciously recognize the danger for everyone—the public danger—if even one subject traverses her or his private fantasy. If the fantasy of one subject breaks down and ceases to obscure the void at the heart of the symbolic structure, then everyone's fantasy becomes questionable. Leaving his fantasy unarticulated and unrealized, Murdoch's fellow citizens protect him from facing the void that it obscures. Just as the subject's traversal of the fantasy has political consequences for the whole society, the whole society's (political) commitment to keeping fantasy hidden acts as a barrier to the subject's traversal of the fantasy.

Perhaps the most insightful moment in *Dark City* occurs when Murdoch tries to take the subway to Shell Beach. This scene offers an exact depiction of the impossible status of the fantasy within the symbolic order. When Murdoch takes a local train to Shell Beach, the train stops before arriving, and an announcement tells the passengers that they must exit the train. After disembarking, he is told that only the express train goes all the way to Shell Beach. But it turns out that there is no station at which one can board the express train, and so all one can do is to watch it go by. Here we have the dilemma of fantasy in a nutshell: the local train that we can take never arrives at the destination, and only the express train that we can't board actually makes it there. We miss the object one way or the other.[13] These failures are not simply empirical obstacles

13. In its depiction of the impossible status of the fantasy, *Dark City* echoes the Kantian (mathematical) antinomies of pure reason. With each of the antinomies, a proposition seems as if it must be true because its opposite is false. For example, we can prove that the world cannot have a beginning in time, so

to the realization of the fantasy but work to constitute and sustain the fantasy. The fantasy only continues to function insofar as we find ourselves in the situation of Murdoch—unable to track it down.

Fantasy relies on the subject's distance from it in order to be effective. Shell Beach must remain inaccessible and always on the horizon. When the subject gets too close to the fantasy, the fantasy breaks down, as *Dark City* illustrates. Dissatisfied with his inability to find Shell Beach, Murdoch finally corners Schreber and demands that Schreber take him there. The course is circuitous: they travel by boat down an isolated river and then walk through a series of narrow passages. When Murdoch opens the final door leading to "Shell Beach," the camera is positioned behind him, so that we see Murdoch looking at what appears to be a bright blue vista. By first introducing us to "Shell Beach" obscured by a doorway and through a long shot, Proyas plays with our expectations, forcing us as spectators to become aware of our own investment in fantasy. It initially looks as if Murdoch has actually realized his fantasy, that he has finally arrived at Shell Beach. A quick cut to a closeup of Murdoch looking at the scene seems to confirm this: his expression connotes amazement. However, when we finally see "Shell Beach" through a subjective shot from Murdoch's perspective, it becomes apparent that the reason for this amazement is not the realization of the fantasy. It turns out that Shell Beach, once one actually arrives at it, is nothing but a poster of Shell Beach plastered on a brick wall. What seemed from the initial long shot

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we deduce that it must be temporally infinite. The problem is, for Kant, that we can also prove that the world cannot be infinite, allowing us to deduce that the world has a beginning in time. The contradiction here is obvious, and it stems from applying the concepts of the Understanding transcendentally—to a world that does not exist phenomenally. Hence, according to Kant, the world neither has a temporal beginning nor is it infinite; it cannot be thought in these terms. To translate back into the realm of *Dark City*, because the local train does not go far enough to arrive at Shell Beach, this seems to imply (as a character suggests to Murdoch) that the express must be the way to get there. However, one cannot board the express train. Both of the options are wrong because Shell Beach, like the world as a whole, does not exist within the phenomenal world. This means that one cannot rely on the Understanding to solve its puzzles.

to be the bright colors of an actual beach turn out to be the faded colors of a mere poster. This is why the fantasy resists complete articulation: if one collapses the distance separating oneself from the fantasy, the imaginary nature of the fantasy becomes readily apparent.

In addition to revealing what happens to fantasy when a subject comes face-to-face with it, *Dark City* also makes evident what fantasy obscures. The most important role of fantasy within the psychic economy is its ability to cover over the traumatic Real on which all ideology rests. As Žižek puts it, "The fantasy which underlies the public ideological text as its non-acknowledged obscene support simultaneously serves as a screen against the direct intrusion of the Real" (1998, pp. 64–65). Fantasy allows us to avoid an encounter with the Real that always threatens to swallow the subject. *Dark City* depicts this dynamic almost literally. Confronted with the poster of Shell Beach and the brick wall underneath, Murdoch (assisted by Inspector Bumstead) takes a hammer to the wall, breaking down the fantasy in order to reveal what lies beyond. After they break through the wall, what they see horrifies them: the image of Shell Beach covered the void of infinite space. Murdoch and Bumstead now recognize that the city is not located on a planet (such as earth, where the film seemed to be set), but is free-floating through the vastness of space. This immediately renders meaningless the entire ideological edifice upon which their world rested. Murdoch and Bumstead see that there is, in the last instance, no ground under their feet, that a void is at the bottom of everything. At this point, Murdoch recognizes that he will never attain his fantasy and that the object of his desire is the product of his own positing. As Schreber tells him, "There is no ocean, John. There is nothing beyond the city. The only place home exists is in your head." Breaking down the wall forces Murdoch into this recognition, and it is akin to what Lacan calls the traversal of the fantasy—the end of psychoanalysis.

When a subject traverses the fantasy, he or she moves from desire (continually seeking the object) to drive (circling around an objectless void). One resists this transition because it entails the

loss of any hope for escape. Desire promises a transcendent future, a future beyond present constraints. But the drive makes no promises; it involves only a perpetual circling. Murdoch is not the only character in the film to pass from desire to drive. Detective Eddie Walenski also made this transition prior to the beginning of the time depicted in the film, but he was unable to face the horror of the drive's monotony and became mad (thus leaving him unable to assist Murdoch in his political action). On the walls of his office and home, Walenski draws spirals that close in on themselves in order to represent the inescapability of the drive. He tells Bumstead, "I've been spending time in the subway, riding in circles, thinking in circles." Whereas desire proceeds in a linear fashion, metonymically moving from object to object, the drive is circular and thus is completely self-enclosed. It is a circular motion constantly turning in on itself. Walenski eventually kills himself in order to escape the monotony of the drive, which indicates that the fantasy of an other place (such as Shell Beach) retained a hold over him. In its hope for relief from present conditions, literal suicide is necessarily accompanied by a fantasmatic supplement—an image of a better place somewhere else (even if this is only oblivion). In opting for suicide, Walenski reveals that he is unable to reconcile himself to the object's nonexistence. Murdoch, on the other hand, is able to break from fantasy's hold, and this frees him from the power of ideological control, preparing him for a final battle with the Strangers.

The ideological control of the Strangers depends not so much on the symbolic identity that it produces in the subjects of the city as in its fantasmatic hold over them. This is why Žižek claims that "the crucial precondition for breaking the chains of servitude is thus to 'traverse the fantasy' which structures our jouissance in a way which keeps us attached to the Master—makes us accept the framework of the social relationship of domination" (1998, p. 48). Traversing the fantasy frees the subject from the power of symbolic authority by subverting the subject's libidinal investment in that authority. Murdoch cannot become a fully radicalized subject until he abandons the hope that Shell Beach might bring him complete

satisfaction. This hope represents an investment in the authority of the Strangers because it is this authority that has created Shell Beach. Hence, challenging the authority of the Strangers, prior to traversing the fantasy, would threaten to undermine the fantasy. It is for this reason that fantasy plays such a crucial role in keeping subjects in line. However, when he traverses the fantasy of Shell Beach (his fundamental fantasy), nothing stands in the way of Murdoch mounting a political challenge to the hegemony of the Strangers.[14]

The point at which Murdoch shatters the Shell Beach fantasy and lays bare the void that it covers marks the radical moment of *Dark City*. But the film is unable to sustain this radicality, this confrontation with the void that underlies the symbolic structure. After Murdoch and Bumstead break through the Shell Beach poster and expose the void, the Strangers appear, and during the ensuing struggle, Bumstead and one of the Strangers fall through the hole in the wall and are thrust into the vacuum of space. This seemingly horrific event is actually a wholly ideological development,

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14. This depiction of the relationship between traversing the fantasy and the authentic political act has a notable precursor within science fiction film: Norman Jewison's *Rollerball* (1975). In this film, Jonathan E. (James Caan) is the most popular player of the futuristic sport called rollerball. The corporate bosses who run the society find this popularity threatening to the social order, since the intended lesson of rollerball is the futility of individual action. Hence, in the beginning of the film, they demand that he retire. Jonathan resists this demand because he has only two loves—rollerball and his ex-wife, Ella, who left him for a corporate executive. However, Jonathan feels reluctant to challenge the corporate authority that provides a comfortable life for him. What really fuels Jonathan's complacency is the fantasy of Ella, the idea of an idyllic past with her and her possible future return. Though they are taking away his sport, Jonathan takes solace in this fantasy. Whenever Jonathan feels depressed, he plays video footage of himself and Ella enjoying themselves together. The crucial moment in the film occurs when, just after a final corporate demand that he retire, Jonathan erases this video, thereby breaking the hold that the fantasy of Ella has over him. Prior to this time, Jonathan has been an apolitical sports hero, a Michael Jordan of the future rather than a Muhammed Ali. But after traversing the fantasy, Jonathan is able to unite the crowd at the championship game in defiance of the corporate executives. As in *Dark City*, traversing the fantasy opens up the possibility of the political act where before nothing seemed possible.

as the subsequent shot indicates. After Bumstead's body leaves the world of the city and enters into space, the next shot depicts the city subjectively—from the impossible perspective of Bumstead as he floats lifelessly through space. We gradually see that what seemed like a planet is actually a vast, self-contained spaceship, unattached to any solar system. The problem with this shot is that it is purely fantasmatic: it posits a "real world" (à la Shell Beach, though perhaps not as attractive) beyond the confines of our present world. At this point, the film implies that there is a vast universe of space (and possibly, somewhere, Earth, a "real" home) beyond the ideological world of the city. It presents space itself as the "real world," as the place at which we arrive after traversing the fantasy. But this is the fantasmatic gesture par excellence. Traversing the fantasy doesn't allow us to escape the limits of our present situation; instead, it allows us to see that there is nothing beyond those limits, that the image of the beyond is the product of the limits themselves. That is to say, fantasy doesn't conceal the "real world" (however bleak), but instead works to convince us that such a place exists, just beyond our reach. Traversing the fantasy involves the recognition that there is no beyond—or, rather, that the beyond exists within the present world.[15] In this sense, *Dark City*, though it depicts Murdoch traversing the fantasy, almost immediately restores the dimension of fantasy for the spectator. But despite this lapse into fantasy, the film soon reveals the political possibilities unleashed through fantasy's traversal.

After he breaks from the fantasmatic control of the Strangers, Murdoch finds himself under their physical control: he becomes their prisoner, and they plan to imprint their collective identity into his mind. They believe that because Murdoch has successfully

15. Because it involves seeing the beyond as existing within the present world, the psychoanalytic cure might be seen as the transformation of Kantian subjects into Hegelian ones. Kant insists on the existence of the thing in itself beyond our phenomenal world. For Kant, we know that the thing in itself exists, but we also know that we cannot access it. In his critique of Kant, Hegel does not reject the thing in itself per se. He simply claims that it exists within the phenomenal world: it remains a thing in itself, but it is a thing in itself *for us*.

resisted them, he can become the vehicle for their deliverance. But instead of imprinting the identity of the Strangers into Murdoch, Schreber imprints Murdoch with a series of memories. These memories include a tutorial designed to teach Murdoch how to develop his power of tuning in order to thwart the Strangers. Because he no longer has any (fantasmatic) investment in their authority, Murdoch is not seduced by the memories themselves and uses them solely as a tool for battling the Strangers. He knows that he has nothing to lose in destroying the symbolic edifice that the Strangers have authored. Thus assisted by Schreber, Murdoch defeats the Strangers and frees humanity from their control. His private victory over the Strangers' authority is at once a collective victory as well.

It is at this point that we see most clearly the link between psychoanalysis and political action. Psychoanalysis assists the analysand in traversing the fantasy and thereby breaking from her or his investment in symbolic authority. As we have seen, in the film Murdoch undergoes a process similar to psychoanalysis, concluding with his traversal of the Shell Beach fantasy. This is the process that makes possible Murdoch's subsequent political act of overthrowing the Strangers. There is no authentic political act without a prior traversing of the fantasy. Thus, psychoanalysis—and the psychoanalytic critique of ideology—leads us to political action. As long as Murdoch remained invested in the authority of the Strangers at the level of fantasy, he could not even see the opening for a political act. But by traversing the fantasy, he broke down this barrier, thereby revealing the essential role that psychoanalysis plays in politics. While Murdoch does not, of course, undergo actual psychoanalysis, his trajectory in the film—culminating in the traversal of the fantasy—follows that of analysis. Thus, *Dark City* indicates not the political necessity of submitting everyone to analysis (which is clearly an unworkable proposition) but the political importance of adopting the psychoanalytic path and its attitude toward fantasy.

Psychoanalysis is integral to the authentic political act because of the nature of symbolic authority. Symbolic authority has mas-

tery not as a result of superior force: though there are far fewer Strangers than humans, the Strangers nonetheless have control. Instead, it relies on the fact that those who are under its control are themselves invested in that control. That is, the humans submit to the authority of the Strangers because it provides them with symbolic identity and a fantasmatic support for that identity. This investment in symbolic authority acts as a barrier to political action, giving the humans a reason to sustain the status quo. It is only through the act of traversing the fantasy—an act that psychoanalysis promotes—that subjects can escape this investment and act against symbolic authority. Thus, the apparent short-circuit between psychoanalytic analysis and political action that critics have noted within contemporary Lacanian thought must be seen in a new light. Far from working against concrete political activity, psychoanalytic critique is in fact the basis for it. Without psychoanalysis, politics remains micropolitics, caught within the very symbolic structure that it is trying to contest. With psychoanalysis, we can attain the authentic political act, one that eschews symbolic authority and authors a radical break.

If *Dark City* ended with Murdoch's political act, it would make for a tidy conclusion, and we might unapologetically celebrate its political valence. But the film continues for another five minutes, during which time Murdoch seems to retreat back into the fantasy of Shell Beach, albeit without the Strangers' control. Using his own ability to tune, Murdoch re-creates the city, and in his version, Shell Beach ceases to be just a fantasy. It becomes an actual part of the new social reality. Before dismissing this realization of the fantasy as a typical ideological gesture of Hollywood film—producing private fantasies for mass consumption—we should note how Murdoch relates to the Shell Beach that he has created. This version of Shell Beach realizes his fantasy, but with a price. He can no longer believe that Shell Beach will provide total jouissance; he now knows that it is solely a product of his own act of positing it. This is, in fact, precisely how the analysand relates to the fundamental fantasy at the end of analysis. Psychoanalysis does not eradicate the fundamental fantasy; instead, it transforms how one relates

to it. Rather than seeking a complete jouissance in the fantasy, one obtains jouissance through repeating the meaningless ritual of the fantasy without hope for a jouissance that exists somewhere beyond.[16] Because Murdoch succeeds in taking up this type of relationship to his fundamental fantasy, the problem with the film's ending lies elsewhere.

As he arrives at the beach of his own creation at the end of the film, Murdoch encounters his erstwhile wife, Emma (Jennifer Connelly), to whom the Strangers have given a new identity (Anna). Because she is no longer Emma Murdoch, Anna doesn't remember John. Nonetheless, she does display a hint of recognition and attachment. When Anna responds positively to John, the film implies that their love transcends all efforts at ideological control (as Emma has claimed earlier). It is at this point that *Dark City* most decidedly succumbs to the exigencies of ideology and thereby abandons its earlier ideology critique. But even this retreat is instructive. It reveals that romantic love represents the ultimate barrier to political action today. Romantic love involves a fantasy—the fantasy of a complementary relationship—that few are able to traverse. In this way, romantic love stands most in need of psychoanalysis. Until we submit even our investment in love to the rigors of psychoanalysis, we will remain incapable of fully taking up the genuine political act.

*Dark City* takes us to the edge of this act. If, in the last instance, it fails to be ruthless enough in exposing our fantasmatic investment in symbolic authority, it does have the virtue of making explicit the point of our failure. And, of course, it does more than that. In *Dark City*, Alex Proyas leaves no doubt about the political efficacy of the psychoanalytic critique of ideology. If today we suffer from an absence of authentic political action, this is not the fault

16. The difference between this position and that of the pervert lies in the fundamental hopefulness of the pervert: unlike the subject who has traversed the fantasy, the pervert continues to believe in the existence of the Other—a beyond where we can locate the ultimate jouissance—and all of the pervert's activity attempts to make this jouissance manifest.

of too much psychoanalysis, or of an inability to think Lacan and Marx together. It is more that politics is in abeyance because we haven't taken psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic mode of critique far enough. We must direct this critique toward the fantasies that remain most precious to us, for it is through them that ideology exercises its true power. By lighting this path, *Dark City* unapologetically answers Fredric Jameson's question about the political pertinence of psychoanalysis. Its makes clear that only by fully taking up the mantra of psychoanalytic critique can we pave the way for politics.

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# 7

# *An Ethical Plea for Lies and Masochism*

SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

Atom Egoyan's masterpiece, *The Sweet Hereafter* (1997), is arguably *the* film about the impact of a trauma on a community. Mitchell Stephens (Ian Holm), a lawyer, arrives in the wintry hamlet of San Dent to sign up the parents of children who died when their school bus plunged into an ice-covered lake. His motto is "there are no accidents": there are no gaps in the causal link of responsibility; there always *has* to be someone who is guilty. (As we soon learn, he is not doing this on account of his professional avarice. Stephens's obsession with the complete causal link is rather his desperate strategy to cope with private trauma, to sort out responsibility for his own daughter, Zoe [Caerthan Banks], a junkie who despises him, although she repeatedly calls him demanding money. He insists that everything must have a cause in order to counteract the inexplicable gap that separates him from Zoe.) After Stephens interviews Dolores Driscoll (Gabrielle Rose), the driver of the bus, who says the accident was a fluke, he visits the families of the dead children, and some of them sign up with him to file a lawsuit. Among them are the parents of Nicole Burnell (Sarah Polley), a teenager who

survived the crash as a paraplegic but remembers nothing. Stephens's case depends on proving that the bus company or the school board was at fault, not Dolores's driving.

Nicole, estranged and cynical since the accident, sees her parents succumbing to greed and Stephens's dark influence. Her father has been molesting her for years; where she once believed in his love, she now sees only exploitation. At the inquest, she decides to lie, testifying that Dolores *was* driving too fast—Stephens's case is thus ruined. While Nicole is now forever isolated from the community, she will be able to guide her own future from now on. In the film's last scene, which takes place two years later, Dolores, now driving a minibus at a nearby airport, meets Stephens on his way to rescue his daughter yet again; they recognize each other, but prefer not to speak. In the film's final lines, Nicole's voice-over accompanies this encounter of Stephens and Dolores: "As you see each other, almost two years later, I wonder if you realize something, I wonder if you realize that all of us—Dolores, me, the children who survived, the children who didn't—that we're all citizens of a different town now. A town of people living in the sweet hereafter."

At first glance, Stephens looks like the film's protagonist. The film begins with his arrival in town, he is involved with the climax, and much of the first half is seen from his point of view. It is Stephens's passion that drives the lawsuit, the dramatic spine of the story—it thus seems that we shall get the standard Hollywood narrative in which the larger tragedy (the bus accident) just offers the background for the true focus, the protagonist's coming to terms with his own trauma. However, halfway through, Egoyan disrupts our expectations with a major shift in point of view: when Nicole leaves the hospital as a paraplegic, the story becomes *hers*, and Stephens is repositioned as her antagonist. Is, then, Nicole's lie an act of *saving the community*, enabling the townspeople to escape the painful judicial examination that would have torn their lives apart? Is it not that, through it, the community is allowed to absolve itself, that is, to avoid the *second* trauma of the symbolization of the accident, and to enter the fantasmatic bliss of the "sweet

hereafter" in which, by an unspoken pact among them, the catastrophe is silently ignored? Is it in this sense that her lie is an *act* in the strict sense of the term—an "immoral" lie that answers the unconditional call of Duty, enabling the community to start again from zero?[1] Is this not the basic lesson of the film, namely that our social reality as such is a "sweet hereafter" based on a constitutive lie? The young incestuous girl, with her lie, enables a community to reconstitute itself—we all live in a "sweet hereafter"; social reality itself is a "sweet hereafter" based on the disavowal of some trauma. The townspeople who survive as a community connected with a secret bond of the disavowed knowledge, obeying their own secret rules, are not the model of a pathological community, but the very (unacknowledged) model of our "normal" social reality, as in Freud's dream about Irma's injection, in which social reality (the spectacle of the three doctors-friends proposing contradictory excuses for the failure of Freud's treatment of Irma) emerges as the "sweet hereafter" following the traumatic confrontation with the trauma of Irma's deep throat.

However, such a reading oversimplifies the film's texture. Does the traumatic accident really derail the idyllic life of the small town community? It seems that the opposite is the case: before the catastrophic accident, the community was far from idyllic—its members indulged in adultery, incest, and so forth, so that the accident, by way of localizing the violence in the external/contingent traumatic bus accident, by way of displacing it onto this accident, retroactively renders the community edenic. However, such a reading also misses the point. The key indication of the community life is provided by the way the daughter/father incest (which went on before the accident) is presented: strangely, this ultimate transgression is rendered as totally *nontraumatic*, as part of everyday intimate relations. We are in a community in which incest is "normal." Perhaps, then, this allows us to risk a Levi-Straussian reading of the film: What if its structuring opposition is the same as the one

1. I owe this point to Christina Ross, McGill University, Montreal.

Levi-Strauss identifies in his famous analysis of the Oedipus myth (see Levi-Strauss 1963), namely the opposition between overvaluation and undervaluation of the kinship ties—concretely: between incest and losing children in an accident (or, in the case of the lawyer Stephens, losing ties with a junkie daughter)? The key insight of the story concerns the link between the two opposites: it is as if, since parents are so attached to their children, following the proverbial obsessional strategy, they prefer to strike preemptively, that is, to stage themselves the loss of the child in order to avoid the unbearable waiting for the moment when, upon growing up, the child will abandon them. This notion is expressed clearly by Stephens in a side story not used by Egoyan, when he muses on his disavowed decision to let his young daughter in a store: "I must have known that if my child was indeed to be lost to me, then I would need all my strength just to survive that fact, so I had decided ahead of time not to waste any of my strength trying to save what was already lost" (Banks 1992, p. 54).

The reference of the film is, of course, Robert Browning's famous poem *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, repeatedly quoted through the film by Nicole, with the longest quote occurring when her father takes her into the barn for sex. And the ultimate proto-Hegelian paradox (identity of the opposites) is that it is Stephens himself, the angry outsider, who is the true Pied Piper in the film. That is to say, the way the community survived the loss was to replace the dead child with the dreamed one: "It's the other child, the dreamed baby, the remembered one, that for a few moments we think exists. For those few moments, the first child, the real baby, the dead one, is not gone; she simply never was" (Banks 1992, pp. 125–126). What the successful litigation pursued by Stephens would have brought about is the disturbance of this fragile solution. The pacifying specter of the dreamed child would have disintegrated; the community would have been confronted with the loss as such, with the fact that their children *did* exist and now *no longer do*. So if Stephens is the Pied Piper of the film, his threat is that he will snatch away not the real children, but the dreamed ones, thus confront-

ing the community not only with the loss as such, but with the inherent cruelty of their solution, which involves the denial of the very existence of the lost real children. Is this, then, the reason Nicole lied? In a true stroke of genius, Egoyan wrote an additional stanza in the Browning style, which Nicole recites over a close-up of her father's mouth after she has falsely implicated Dolores:

> And why I lied he only knew
> But from my lie this did come true
> Those lips from which he drew his tune
> Were frozen as the winter moon.

These frozen lips, of course, stand not only for the dead children, but also for Nicole's rejection of being further engaged in the incest: only her father knew the truth about why she lied at the hearing—the truth of her lie being a NO! to her father. And this NO! is at the same time a NO! to the community (*Gemeinschaft*) as opposed to society (*Gesellschaft*). When does one belong to a community? The difference concerns the netherworld of unwritten obscene rules that regulate the "inherent transgression" of the community, the way we are allowed/expected to violate its explicit rules. This is why the subject who closely follows the explicit rules of a community will never be accepted by its members as "one of us": he does not participate in the transgressive rituals that effectively keep this community together. And society as opposed to community is a collective that can dispense with this set of unwritten rules—since this is impossible, there is no society without community. This is where the theories that advocate the subversive character of mimicry get it wrong. According to these theories, the properly subversive attitude of the Other—say, of a colonized subject who lives under the domination of the colonizing culture—is to mimic the dominant discourse, but with a distance, so that what he does and says is like what the colonizers themselves do, almost like it, with an unfathomable difference that makes his Otherness all the more palpable. One is tempted to turn this thesis around: it

is the foreigner, emulating faithfully the rules of the dominant culture he wants to penetrate and identify with, who is condemned forever to remain an outsider because he fails to practice, to participate in, the self-distance of the dominant culture, the unwritten rules that tell us how and when to violate the explicit rules of this culture. We are "in," integrated in a culture, perceived by their members as "one of us," only when we succeed in practicing this unfathomable *distance* from the symbolic rules—it is ultimately only this distance that exhibits our identity, our belonging to the culture in question. And the subject reaches the level of a true ethical stance only when he moves beyond this duality of the public rules as well as their superego shadow. In John Irving's *The Cider House Rules*, these three levels of ethics are staged in an exemplary way. First, we get the straight morality (the set of explicit rules we choose to obey—Homer Wells, the novel's hero, chooses never to perform an abortion); then, we experience its obscene underside (this is what takes place in the "cider house" in which, while on seasonal work there, Homer learns that explicit rules are sustained by more obscene implicit rules with which it is better not to mess); finally, when, based on this experience, Homer acknowledges the necessity to *break* the explicit moral rules (he performs an abortion), he reaches the level of ethics proper. And does the same not go also for Nicole in *The Sweet Hereafter*? Is Nicole's act not the gesture of asserting her distance from both poles, the larger society as well as the "sweet hereafter" of the traumatized community and its secret rules?

This superego injunction often assumes the deceptive form of its very opposite. Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown* (2000) tells the story of a group of characters that includes an illegal immigrant from Romania and a war photographer (played by Juliette Binoche—a significant fact with regard to her role in Kieslowski's *Blue* [1993], since Haneke is already praised by some critics as the Kieslowski of the next decade). These characters occupy the same space, the same streets, but they might as well inhabit different planets: even when they try to help one another, the results are

often catastrophic. The problem is not only that these individuals are alienated from each other: they are already alienated from *themselves*, unable to display their true selves. In a key scene of the film, Binoche is being held hostage by a mysterious character whose voice is bombarding her with "Show me your true face," "Just be spontaneous," "Show me a true expression." If she will not comply with these demands, he is going to kill her. But though her life hangs in the balance, she cannot comprehend what he means. None of the characters thus dare to expose a true face, their inner self, so no one knows anyone else. In the middle of modern Paris, these people are incapable of communicating with each other. This is what the film's title refers to: "you cannot understand what is being said if you don't know the code" (Michael Haneke, quoted in Said 2001, p. 24).

How, then, are we to read this deadlock? On the one hand, there is the obvious humanist reading: we should learn to display our true face, to be spontaneous, to show what we really feel and mean, and the world will be better, there will be more of authentic communication and solidarity, our acts will really relate to others. However, a wholly different reading also imposes itself: What if, precisely, *there is no "unknown code" to be deciphered*, what if the reality itself is that we don't know the code because there is no code, no substantial psychological reality behind the masks we are wearing? This, precisely, is what Lacan aims at with his proposition that "there is no big Other (*il n'y a pas de grand Autre*)": there is no ultimate code regulating our exchanges. If we read the film in this way, then the mysterious voice addressing Binoche, far from being a benevolent agent of authentic communication, is the terrorist superego agency bombarding us with impossible and ultimately obscene demands.

And how are we to break out of this superego cycle? In David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999), an extraordinary achievement for Hollywood, the insomniac hero (superbly played by Edward Norton) follows his doctor's advice and, in order to discover what true suffering is, starts visiting the support group of the victims of

testicular cancer.[2] However, he soon discovers how such practice of the love for one's neighbors relies on a false subjective position (of voyeurist compassion), and soon gets involved in a much more radical exercise. On a flight, he meets Tyler (Brad Pitt), a charismatic young man who explains to him the abortiveness of his life filled with failure and empty consumer culture, and offers him a solution: Why don't they fight, beating each other to a pulp? Gradually, a whole movement develops out of this idea: secret after-hours boxing matches are held in the basements of bars all around the country. The movement quickly gets politicized, organizing terrorist attacks against big corporations. In the middle of the film, there is an almost unbearably painful scene, worthy of the weirdest David Lynch moments, which serves as a kind of clue for the film's final surprising twist. In order to blackmail his boss into paying him for not working, the narrator throws himself around the man's office, beating himself bloody before building security arrives; in front of his embarrassed boss, the narrator thus enacts on himself the boss's aggressivity toward himself. Afterward, the narrator muses in a voice-over: "For some reason, I thought of my first fight—with Tyler." This first fight between the narrator and Tyler, which takes place in a parking lot outside a bar, is watched by five young men who laugh and exchange glances in wondrous amusement:

> Because the fight is being watched by people who do not know the participants, we are led to believe that what we are seeing is what they are seeing: that is, a fight between two men. It isn't until the end that we are shown that they were watching the narrator throw himself around the parking lot, beating himself up. [Nayman 2001, p. 58]

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2. Among other superb moments, the screenplay of *Fight Club* contains what is arguably the best pro-abortion line in the history of cinema (which, unfortunately, was not included in the film itself): in the midst of the intense lovemaking with the hero, his girlfriend gasps: "I love you. I want to have your abortion." *This*, and not the proverbial "I want to have your child," is the ultimate expression of love: the gesture of *sacrificing* the offspring and thus asserting the love relationship as the absolute end-in-itself.

Toward the end of the film, we thus learn that the narrator does not know that he has been leading a second life until the evidence becomes so overwhelming he can no longer deny the fact: Tyler has no existence outside the narrator's mind. When other characters interact with him, they are really interacting with the narrator, who has taken on the Tyler persona. However, it is obviously not sufficient to read the scene of Norton beating himself in front of his boss as an indication of Tyler's nonexistence—the unbearably painful and embarrassing effect of the scene bears witness to the fact that it discloses (stages) a certain disavowed fantasmatic truth. In the novel on which *Fight Club* is based, this scene is rendered as an exchange between what is really going on (Norton is beating himself up in front of his boss), and Norton's fantasy (the boss is beating up Tyler):

> At the projectionist union office, Tyler had laughed after the union president punched him. The one punch knocked Tyler out of his chair, and Tyler sat against the wall, laughing.
>
> "Go ahead, you can't kill me," Tyler was laughing. "You stupid fuck. Beat the crap out of me, but you can't kill me."
>
> [. . .]
>
> "I am trash," Tyler said. "I am trash and shit and crazy to you and this whole fucking world."
>
> [. . .]
>
> His honor shot the wingtip into Tyler's kidneys after Tyler curled into a ball, but Tyler was still laughing.
>
> "Get it out," Tyler said. "Trust me. You'll feel a lot better. You'll feel great."
>
> [. . .]
>
> I am standing at the head of the manager's desk when I say, what?
>
> You don't like the idea of *this*?
>
> And without flinching, still looking at the manager, I roundhouse the fist at the centrifugal force end of my arm and slam fresh blood out of the cracked scabs in my nose.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Blood gets on the carpet and I reach up and grip monster

> handprints of blood on the edge of the hotel manager's desk and say, please, help me, but I start to giggle.
>
> [. . . ]
>
> You have so much, and I have nothing. And I start to climb my blood up the pinstriped legs of the manager of the Pressman Hotel who is leaning back, hard, with his hands on the windowsill behind him and even his thin lips retreating from his teeth.
>
> [. . . ]
>
> There's a struggle as the manager screams and tries to get his hands away from me and my blood and my crushed nose, the filth sticking to the blood on both of us, and right then at our most excellent moment, the security guards decide to walk in. [Palahniuk 1996, pp. 114–117]

What the self-beating stands for is the subject's scatological (excremental) identification, which equals adopting the position of the proletarian who has nothing to lose. The pure subject emerges only through this experience of radical self-degradation: when I let/provoke the other to beat the crap out of me, emptying me of all substantial content, of all symbolic support that could confer on me a minimum of dignity. Consequently, when Norton beats himself in front of his boss, his message to the boss is: "I know you want to beat me, but, you see, your desire to beat me is also my desire, so, if you were to beat me, you would be fulfilling the role of the servant of my perverse masochist desire. But you are too much of a coward to act out your desire, so I will do it for you—here you have it, what you really wanted. Why are you so embarrassed? Are you not ready to accept it?"[3] Crucial here is the gap between fantasy and reality. The boss, of course, would have never effectively beaten up Norton; he was merely fantasizing about

3. The only scene from an earlier Hollywood film that somehow announces this one is from Don Siegel's *Dirty Harry*, in which the serial killer, in order to denounce "Dirty Harry" (Inspector Callahan, played by Clint Eastwood) for police brutality, hires a thug to beat his face into a pulp. Even when his face is already soaked in blood, he continues to solicit him: "Hit me harder!"

doing it, and the painful effect of Norton's self-beating hinges on the very fact that he stages the content of the secret fantasy his boss would never be able to actualize.

Paradoxically, such a staging is the first act of liberation: by means of it, the servant's masochist libidinal attachment to his master is brought to the daylight, and the servant thus acquires a minimal *distance* toward it. Already at a purely formal level, the fact of beating oneself up renders clear the simple fact that *the master is superfluous*: "Who needs you for terrorizing me? I can do it myself!" It is thus only through first beating up (hitting) *oneself* that one becomes free: the true goal of this beating is to beat out that which in me attaches me to the master. When, toward the end, Norton shoots at himself (surviving the shot, effectively killing only "Tyler in himself," his double), he thereby also liberates himself from the dual mirror-relationship of beating: in this culmination of self-aggression, its logic cancels itself, Norton will no longer have to beat himself—now he will be able to beat the true enemy (the system).[4] And, incidentally, the same strategy is occasionally used in political demonstrations: when a crowd is stopped by the police ready to beat them, the way to bring about a shocking reversal of the situation is for the individuals in the crowd to start beating each other. In his essay on Sacher-Masoch, Gilles Deleuze elaborated in detail this aspect: far from bringing any satisfaction to the sadist witness, the masochist's self-torture frustrates the sadist, depriving him of his power over the masochist (see Deleuze 1991). Sadism involves a relationship of domination, while masochism is the necessary first step toward liberation. When we are subjected to a power mechanism, this subjection is always and by definition sustained by some libidinal investment: the subjection itself generates a surplus-enjoyment of its own. This subjection is embodied in a network of "material" bodily practices, and, for this reason, we cannot get rid of our subjection through a merely intellectual reflection. Our liberation has to be *staged* in some kind of bodily performance,

4. For a more detailed account of the notion of act as "striking back at oneself," see Žižek (2000).

and, furthermore, this performance *has* to be of an apparently "masochistic" nature; it *has* to stage the painful process of hitting back at oneself.[5]

*Fight Club* should be considered as the last link in the chain of the great Hollywood trilogy on "the man who wasn't there" from the last couple of years, with the two other installments being Bryan Singer's *The Usual Suspects* and M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*.[6] What we discover at the end of the last film, the story about a psychiatrist (Bruce Willis) who encounters a young kid with supernatural capacities (of materializing visions of the dead people who walk around seen only by him and unaware that they are dead), is that, without knowing it, the psychiatrist himself was all the time already dead, just a ghost evoked by the kid. So we have here the verbatim realization of the scene from the Freudian dream in which the father who appears to the son *doesn't know that he is dead*, and has to be reminded of it. The shock of this denouement is that it turns around the standard discovery that I am alone, that all people around me are dead or puppets or aliens, that they do not exist in the proper human sense. What I discover is that *I myself* (i.e., the film's narrator through whom I see the film, my stand-in in the film) *do not exist*. The move here is properly anti-Cartesian: it's not the world around me that is a fiction, it is *I myself* who am a fiction.

We can see, now, in what way these three films form a trilogy. In *Fight Club*, the narrator (through whose point of view we perceive the film) is himself duped (he doesn't know till the end that his partner doesn't exist); in *The Usual Suspects*, the narrator (Kevin Spacey) of the flashback, which comprises most of the film,

5. It is a clear index of the constraints imposed by the Politically Correct perspective that almost all critical reactions to *Fight Club* remained blind to this emancipatory potential of violence. They saw in the film the reassertion of the violent masculinity as a paranoid reaction to the recent trends that undermine traditional masculinity; consequently, they either condemned the film as proto-Fascist, or commended it as a critique of this proto-Fascist attitude.

6. See the comparison of these three films in Nayman (2001).

is manipulating the police interrogator and us, the spectators, in his retelling of the story of the mysterious Keyser Soeze (who either doesn't exist or is the Spacey character himself), inventing details along the way; at the end of *The Sixth Sense*, the narrator discovers that he doesn't really exist for the others, that he is himself "the man who is not there" in our ordinary reality. Does this trilogy, then, form a closed system, or is it possible to construct a *fourth* term in this series of variations? Perhaps one should risk the hypothesis that the missing fourth term is provided by a European film, Kieslowski's *Red*, apropos of whose central character (the Judge) Kieslowski himself remarked that it is not sure if he *exists at all*, or if he is just the product of Valentine's imagination, her fantasy (the mythical figure who secretly "pulls the strings of fate"). With the exception of two scenes, one never sees him with other people except with Valentine:

> Does the Judge even exist? To be honest, the only proof . . . is the tribunal, the sole place where we see him with other people. Otherwise he could be merely a ghost, or better yet, a possibility—the old age that awaits Auguste, what might have happened if Auguste had not taken the ferry. [Amiel 1997, p. 147]

So, although the Judge in *Red* is a "real person," part of the film's diegetic reality, his symbolic-libidinal status is nonetheless that of a spectral apparition, of someone who exists as Valentine's fantasy creation. This unique procedure is the opposite of the standard revelation of the illusory status of (what we previously misperceived as the) part of reality. What is thereby asserted is rather, in a paradoxical tautological move, *the illusory status of the illusion itself*—the illusion that there is some suprasensible noumenal Entity is rendered precisely as an "illusion," as a fleeting apparition. And, again, what this means is that we cannot ever comprehend the "whole" of reality that we encounter. If we are to be able to endure our encounter of reality, some part of it has to be "derealized," experienced as a spectral apparition.

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# 8

# *Impossible Love in* Breaking the Waves: *Mystifying Hysteria*

FRANCES L. RESTUCCIA

> *I've been doing nothing but that since I was twenty, exploring the philosophers on the subject of love.*
>
> —Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX*

This essay first lays out Lacan's three orders of Love, as I see them. It then moves to his theory of hysteria, since it is the hysteric who turns to Love, to compensate for her lack of feminine identification. I focus on hysteria also to examine Lars Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, which film catapults us back to the question of Love. For *Breaking the Waves* depicts a "hysterical" ~~Woman~~ in Love, a "masochistic," mystical Woman—that is, a ~~Woman~~ who doesn't exist—in Lacanian Love, in a sense with God. I am interested in grasping, and attempting to convey, primarily Lacan's third-order Love, Love in the beyond, as well as in comprehending *Breaking the Waves* as an attempt at representing this unrepresentable, impossible Love. I am even more interested in the way the heroine of *Breaking the Waves* gets mired in the internal contradiction of her hysterical logic and as a result falls into the pit of Love. Bess thereby enables the desire of the Other at the price of her subjectivity, as

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she coalesces with, rather than simply pretends to be, object *a*. Two paths seem to me open to the hysteric: that of the mystic and that of the *femme fatale* (the latter of which I pursue elsewhere), each of which seems fatal for One subjectivity or the Other. Of course, what we have here are variations on Lacan's "theme" that there is no sexual relation.

## I.

> *The epithalamion, the duet* (duo)*—one must distinguish the two of them—the alternation, the love letter, they're not the sexual relationship. They revolve around the fact that there's no such thing as a sexual relationship.*
>
> —Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX*

There is a "radical distinction," in Lacan's view, "between *loving oneself through an other*—which, in the narcissistic field of the object, allows no transcendence to the object," what we might call narcissistic or first-order love—and love produced via "the circularity of the drive, in which the heterogeneity of the movement out and back shows a gap in its interval" (Lacan 1981, p. 194). In the latter case, in what I call second-order love, tantamount to desire, the true, compelling, ultimate love object is more than, exceeds, the person beloved. The love object is someone who is, in a way, not—not there, except transcendently, but whose present absence is absolutely, paradoxically, necessary for the love. In second-order love—that is, the "love" that compensates for the lack of a sexual relation—the object of desire is sewn together with the object of the drive, the latter of which (that is, the drive) serves as a basis of one's love pursuit. Drive encircles object *a*; we fall in love with (of course, unconsciously) the object *a*, that is, with what the other does *not* possess. Hence object *a* becomes the never attainable object of desire. And hence Lacan asserts that love is giving what one doesn't have.

In theorizing love, Lacan proposes that it is in the field of the Other that the subject must engage in "pure activity," one example of which, he writes, is the exercise of any drive—a masochistic

drive, for example—that "requires that the masochist give himself . . . a devil of a job" (Lacan 1981, p. 200). A central question this essay poses, then, is how much is masochism a mere example of, as opposed to being integral to, Lacan's paradigm of love? It would seem that "the mystery of love" entails the devilish job of searching, in the field of the Other, for a lost part of oneself (Lacan 1981, p. 205). Mediated by love, the object of the drive gets appropriated as the object of desire. But what, more fully, is the devilish job given to the subject by such a transfer?

In earlier work I have done on this question, I have entertained the answer that, in negotiating the move from drive to desire, the subject is apt to fall into the chasm of Love in-between. That is: since a gap necessarily exists between the ostensible object and the object-cause of desire, there really is no object of love, only its semblance. There is an object-cause of desire located in a false object, and therefore, as Bruce Fink stresses in *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, "*Human desire, strictly speaking, has no object*" (Fink 1997, p. 51, italics in original). Moreover, since the true object of love would have to *be* the missing part, encountering it would be, if it could happen, an encounter with the gaze. In other words, if the subject were to recognize his or her absent self at this point of lack, at the point of the object *a*, s/he would encounter the constitutive absent love object, the gaze.

The final two paragraphs of *The Four Fundamental Concepts* clinch this idea of what I call third-order Love—a Love beyond both specular (or narcissistic) love as well as beyond desire—as more than dangerous, as potentially annihilating, as is the gaze. Lacan posits Love in a "beyond." It is only the *signification* of a limitless love that may emerge, within the limits of the law, in the realm of desire—desire being the movement toward a love object, and Love, then, being psychic consummation with the object *a*. To be in Love in this latter sense is to head toward dissolution, the loss of sanity, for it is to cross into the "beyond," to defy the limit of the law, and so it gives one the devil of a job. It is to annex to oneself that missing part that one *must* lack to maintain subjectivity. And therefore

it is impossible—as Lacan proposes in *Encore*, "love is impossible"—providing entry into the impossible real. Being limitless, "outside the limits of the law," such a love may "live," Lacan writes—and, I add, can "be lived"—only "[t]here" (Lacan 1981, p. 276). Achieving love, therefore, might be seen as the ultimate masochistic act, requiring one's own blissful obliteration.

Lacan's eleventh seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, gives the impression that all of these matters pertain similarly to men and women. But in *Encore* (1998), Lacan describes two forms of jouissance—phallic jouissance and Other jouissance—that situate "man" on the side of desire (or phallic jouissance) and "woman" on the side of Love (or Other jouissance). Here, the problem of Love is put more specifically in terms of the impossibility of a sexual relation between a man and a woman. Whereas in *The Four Fundamental Concepts* all subjects seem to risk devastation upon achieving Love, in *Encore* it is the unfeasibility of the sexual relation—because of the incommensurability of the "man" and the "woman"—that makes Love impossible. And it is impossible for the "man" and the "woman" in different ways.

Lacan regards Eros as "a tension toward the One" (1998, p. 5). Desire (or phallic jouissance) merely leads one to aim at the gap between oneself and the Other, while Love is at the place of being, adhering to what slips away in language. Love itself therefore cannot be articulated. The stumbling block is the inadequacy of a *relation* between the One and the Other. And so the "man" through fantasy places an object in the position of what cannot be glimpsed of the Other. But for the "woman," something beyond object *a* is at stake in what comes to compensate for the sexual relation that does not exist. A ~~Woman~~ enters into a *ménage à trois*, making God the third party in the business of love. For a man, the act of love entails approaching the cause of his desire, object *a*. But a woman goes beyond the phallic function; she is something more, acting on a jouissance of the body surpassing the phallus. Hers is a jouissance that belongs to the ~~Woman~~, that is, to the Woman who doesn't exist. Hence she is a mystic, one who has a sense that there is "a jouissance that is beyond" (Lacan 1998, p. 76).

In "A Love Letter," Lacan describes woman as fundamentally related to the Other. She is the Other in the sexual relationship, the Other being what is missing, what cannot be added to the One. (And it is insofar as her jouissance is radically Other that woman has more of a relationship to God.) Where the woman is whole—the place where man sees her—she has an unconscious, but her jouissance is "in the realm of the infinite" (Lacan 1998, p. 103). On the male side, then, there is the reduction of the jouissance of the Other to object *a*; on the female side, there is the enigmatic. All love is attached to the illusion that the sexual relation may stop not being written. Yet true love resides not in writing, but in Being.

In a very rich book, newly translated into English, called *What Does a Woman Want?*, Serge André (1999) poses the question of whether it is possible to know *anything* about Other jouissance, making a suggestion that returns us to the topic of masochism—that through suffering one might access jouissance. Would such suffering include, or even be, the desubjectivation that the woman undergoes when she is in Love? If this is the case, it may appear that there are two dominant forms of masochism operating in Lacan: one we might align with "man," in the form of perversion, and the other with "woman," in the form of desubjectivation. In fact, André believes that the only way we (or perhaps I should say men) can begin to approach the Woman who doesn't exist is through perversion, for (as we know) "The man who gets himself humiliated, insulted, whipped by his confederate is really seeking to take her place as the woman. He offers himself as object in a typical masculine fantasy scenario only in order to experience the remaining *jouissance* not mastered by that fantasy." Perversion offers "a kind of mimetic caricature of feminine *jouissance*." In fact, the first time Lacan dealt with the question of the jouissance of the body, "he framed it in terms of the *jouissance* of the slave" (André 1999, p. 270).

But although there is a fine line here, what André wishes to stress is that, while the masochistic position may share an aim with the feminine position, they are distinct, one the caricature of the other. While the masochist posits the Other, the ~~Woman~~ is in the

place of the Other. While the pervert "slip[s] into the skin of this Other body, like a hand into a glove," the ~~Woman~~ attests to the "*impossible subjectivation of the body as Other*" (André 1999, p. 272, italics in original). So, technically, we must consider St. Teresa of Avila, for example, a mystic rather than a masochist, or a suffering mystic rather than a masochistic pervert. Beyond what we call her is the question of her representation. André even comments about St. Teresa that her self-description of being "carried away," "ravished," "seized" irresistibly makes her as much of a caricature as the masochistic pervert. Can ~~Woman~~'s jouissance or a ~~Woman~~ in Love be represented? Is all such signification ridiculously inadequate to what cannot be written?

## II.

> *I situate—and why shouldn't I—God as the third party in this business of human love[.] Even materialists sometimes know a bit about the* ménage à trois, *don't they?*
>
> —Lacan, *Seminar XX*

We now need to touch on the rudiments of hysteria. For it is the hysteric who often finds herself, or I should say loses herself, in the realm of Love in an effort to solve her problem of femininity. And it is the case that the heroine of the film I want to examine, *Breaking the Waves*—because it attempts to represent a ~~Woman~~ in Love—exhibits hysterical symptoms, as she emerges from a family apt to generate such symptoms, with its missing father, recently dead brother, and cold, stern mother. It is Bess's mother who accuses Bess of having "a fit of hysterics" even as the mother exudes an abject jouissance especially threatening to her daughter who is desperately seeking feminine identification.

To Lacan, hysteria is a failure of repression that results in the obliteration of the boundary between the sexual and the nonsexual. But there is another failure prior to this one. The hysteric's father typically fails her by not offering the support she counted on. Being structurally impotent, the father was not able to grant her what she needed to establish her femininity. Because she lacks

such a signifier, the hysteric's body image cannot entirely clothe and eroticize the real of her body. She can, in fact, go so extravagantly far as to become ill due to the father's deficiency. She may *devote* herself to repairing him, sometimes sacrificing her entire life, in particular her love life, in the process. For she may denounce phallic impotence only "in the name of a more powerful phallus; she [consequently] wants more and more" (André 1999, p. 125).

The hysteric, therefore, might remain contentedly unsatisfied in the pursuit of one master after another, exposing their insufficiencies one by one in an ongoing, persistent effort to flaunt—and thereby convince herself of—her own desirability as well as to avoid "the danger of experiencing the satisfaction of utmost pleasure, a pleasure that, were [s]he to experience it, would make [her] crazy, . . . dissolve or disappear" (Nasio 1998, p. 5). The trouble comes when her unrelenting pursuit of a feminine identification leads to the creation of a "fantasy of a monster whom we call the other, now strong and all-powerful, now weak and ill, always immense" (Nasio, p. 5). She finds herself *confronted* with the asexuated real of the body in some form of phallic potency, which of course she cannot manage as it would be an excess on top of her own constitutive, unrepressed excess.

That is: while we would expect the hysteric to flee in the opposite direction of the real (as hysterics are wont to do), forever pretending to wish to plug the lack in the Other, which pretense keeps her, as well as the Other, in a state of perpetual unsatisfied desire, it is in pursuing phallic potency—at first in ordinary men who inevitably fail her and then in superhuman sources that end up being all that can make her finite—that she can become nothing, not-all. This is the potential pitfall in hysteria. A woman's demand that tribute be paid to her femininity may lead her exactly where she does *not* want to be. Wanting more than the ordinary phallus, she can get entangled in the internal contradiction of her logic, both wanting and really not wanting to plug the lack in the Master or Other. Looking to seal over the breakdown of her body image through her dream of an all-powerful phallus, she may be

drawn into an ever greater devotion to the Other, where she ends up sacrificing everything for Him. In this scenario, then, she shifts from having a textbook hysterical reaction to her lack of feminine identification—in other words from her game of offering and not offering herself to the Other, in which her expectation is to receive "a frustrating non-response" (Nasio, p. 3)—to seeking and finding Love to solve the problem of this inadequacy, that is, to becoming a Woman who doesn't exist, paired with a Man beyond castration. What the hysteric only pretends to want to do—to "constitut[e] herself as the object that makes the Other desire, since as long as the Other desires, her position as object is assured" (Fink 1997, p. 120)—the Woman who does not exist carries out.

This is the trajectory in *Breaking the Waves*, in which the heroine, Bess, a young, apparently half-witted, fatherless Scottish woman, turns to Love as the surest way, in Lacanian terms, to repair the Other, since (third-order) Love (were it to exist) would more than compensate for the genital drive that fails to unite the subject with the Other. Bess chooses as a partner an Englishman (Jan), a stranger working on a North Sea oil-rig; yet, as Lacan indicates in *Encore*, the feminine position is ultimately addressed to God, with the man as the fantasmatic place-holder.

It is interesting in this connection, though, that once Jan has been paralyzed from the neck down so that Bess and Jan no longer have a sexual relation literally, and therefore are in a sense able to have a "sexual relation" as Lacan conceives of it—as having nothing to do with sex, or sexuation—Bess has trouble accessing God in her periodic prayer sessions. Bess seems to progress in the film from attempting to meet the demands of a strict, chastising God, to a Lacanian "sexual relation" with Jan, which in turn ("Jan and me, we have a spiritual contact," Bess explains) paves the way to a supreme being who can make her all ~~Woman~~. After the accident on the rig, Bess and Jan's relationship would seem to exemplify the sort of rare "encounter" that Lacan briefly alludes to at the end of *Encore* as

> what momentarily gives the illusion that the sexual relationship stops not being written—an illusion that something is not only articulated but inscribed, inscribed in each of our destinies, by which, for a while—a time during which things are suspended—what would constitute the sexual relationship finds its trace and its mirage-like path in the being who speaks. [1998, p. 145]

Is theirs not a Love "that approaches being as such in the encounter" (Lacan 1998, p. 145)? Is film the place where Love that cannot stop not being written can be textualized? And is the muteness of *Breaking the Waves* especially conducive to this brief encounter achieving an elusive representation? Lacan's assertion that "no relationship gets constituted between the sexes in the case of speaking beings, for it is on that basis alone that what makes up for that relationship can be enunciated" (Lacan 1998, p. 66) would seem to imply a "relation" between nonspeaking beings.

Paralyzed, Jan offers the hystericized Bess a provisional feminine identification. In her verbal fantasies his "prick" can always be huge, filling her up as a successful substitute for the structurally impotent father/Other whom she is dedicated to repair through such replacement. Jan's now rigid body almost seems to be the space into which his phallus has expanded—the corpselike space where perhaps, paradoxically, Bess confronts the asexuated real of the body: by encountering the phallus in full like this, she is catapulted beyond the phallic function. Bess lights up upon hearing that Jan, although severely paralyzed, will live, seeming to have no thought about their lost sex life. She is devastated when Jan, much more attuned to such a loss, urges her to take a lover. "It often happens," writes Nasio about hysteria, "that love is transformed into devotion to a sexless other (an invalid, a priest, or a psychoanalyst)" (1998, p. 105). And as Jan seems to want Bess to have sex with other men and subsequently to narrate to him the juicy details, her jouissance of being gets further generated and manifested in her suffering sex and violence at the hands of strange men, indirectly enabling a kind of "impossible" sexual relation between the two of them, Jan and Bess.

Having filled Jan's lack to the point of rendering him a fully phallic Man beyond castration (Bess feels absolutely responsible for Jan's accident on the rig), she sacrifices her subjectivity for Jan as she collapses into the asexuated real of her tortured body. She enacts, in other words, Lacan's proposition that "being is the jouissance of the body as such, that is, as asexual" (1998, p. 6). In turn, she sacrifices for God as well. On the boat the fatal second time, sailing out to put herself at the mercy of exceedingly brutal, knife-happy, sadistic men, Bess prays, accesses God, and offers one of her crazed smiles, her face completely aglow as if made radiant by her connection to God, a God Himself beyond the Law. Challenging her Presbyterian Church leaders, toward the end of the film, Bess cries out her incomprehension over how one could love a Word, or a Law even of God. Instead, to Bess, to love a human being, and in turn to love God, beyond language and the Law, is divine "perfection."

To achieve such perfection, Bess desubjectivates herself, through her experience of the jouissance of being, to the extent that eventually "she comes up against the limit of the 'nothing' to which she is [apparently] condemned" (André 1999, p. 128), to borrow André's description of a possible vanishing point of the hysteric's story. In the end Bess experiences the fatal nature of "perfect" Love and thereby demonstrates the relation of Love to the death instinct. In encountering her lover as a (capital M) Man and as God, vicariously, through men who violate her, Bess destroys herself, as she *must* be destroyed by such a "limitless love," beyond the Law. When Bess's sister-in-law tries to explain to Jan that Bess isn't right in the head, Jan replies, cryptically but knowingly, "she just wants it all"—having everything being an exclusion of nothing, an exclusion of lack, which puts Bess in the place of Other jouissance, paradoxically (that is) in the place of not-all, in the place of the ~~Woman~~ who is "there in full" at the same time as "there is something more" (Lacan 1998, p. 74).

Clinching the idea that she is a postmodern Antigone driven by "radical desire," the "sublime desire" of the saint or mystic, Bess, enacting the ethics of the saint, enables the miraculous resurrec-

tion of Jan at the end.[1] Bess, who so poignantly at the start of the film wanted Jan to want her, wanted, in other words, to convince him that she could fill his lack—"Have me now?" Bess asks coyly in the public bathroom at her wedding party, only minutes after being married[2]—now has "successfully" become his object *a*, the object cause of his desire, just what every hysteric seems to want to be. "Rather than taking the object for herself, as in obsession, the hysteric seeks to divine the Other's desire and to become the particular object that, when missing, makes the Other desire. She constitutes herself on the subject side of the 'equation' as object *a*" (Fink 1997, p. 120).

Having sought throughout the film ways of pleasing the Other (her sister-in-law comments to Bess, "you'd give anything to anybody," as she informs Jan, "you could get her to do anything you want to"), in the end Bess coalesces with the real absence of object *a*. She thereby fulfills the hysteric's fantasy, the fantasy the hysteric wants to remain a fantasy, although it is the case that object *a* is in the position of truth for the hysteric—as Fink puts it, "the truth of the hysteric's discourse, its hidden motor force, is the real" (Fink 1995, p. 134)—and so in a way it makes sense that object *a* is her destination. Having taken on "the devil of a job," having been stabbed to death, Bess desubjectivates herself, having apparently sought out such sacrifice through her pursuit and, one might say,

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1. For an elaboration on the sublime desire of the saint, the ethics of the saint in relation to the ethics of psychoanalysis, all in relation to Antigone/*Antigone*, see Restuccia (1998).

2. Sprawled out naked on Dr. Richardson's bed later on, Bess utters essentially the same pathetic question, "Don't you want me?," reminding us that despite her early, ostensible sexual fulfillment with Jan, her craving to be the object of the Other's desire persists. With Dr. Richardson, of course, Bess is still primarily trying to satisfy Jan, as she is at the end with the men on the ship, one of whom she asks, "What do you want?" or Lacan's famous "*Che vuoi?*" Bess's sexual satisfaction fails to satisfy her. In Nasio's terms, the hysteric may "offer herself to orgasm, but nonetheless [may] not abandon herself to the pleasure in openness." She may thus retain a kind of "fundamental virginity" (1998, p. 36), as Bess certainly seems to do up to the point in the film of disappearing from the sea, in which Jan buries her coffinless body, to float up to heaven.

achievement of Love, which gift of Love, Love in the beyond (having put Jan into relation with the real) inspires Jan's unconscious desire to resist his paralysis, to rise up from his deathbed and live. It would seem that Love entails the destruction of one's existence—which is, then, I propose, another variation on what Lacan means when he claims that love is giving what one lacks—even as it blows vitality into the beloved. This is perhaps why Lacan regarded the analyst, engaging in transference love, as a saint—"there is no better way of placing [the psychoanalyst] objectively than in relation to what was in the past called: being a saint" (1990, p. 15). It would seem too that while Love is mutual, being impossible, it cannot last for long and that inevitably it breaks apart into desire on the one side and either suicide or dejection on the other.

## III.

> *And yet this Other, this body that flees like Achilles' tortoise, is definitely there and definitely real! Let's take up our questions again from a different angle, starting out not from the subject, but from the Other. In this displacement of the question the term "feminine* jouissance" *can find its only reality. . . . If the subject cannot enjoy the Other, might the Other, for its part, be enjoying a* jouissance *that the partner can't manage to get for himself? Put in these terms, our question plays on the ambiguity of the expression "*jouissance *of the Other." Up to now we have understood it as an objective genitive: now let's take it in its subjective sense, where it's the Other who is doing the enjoying.*
>
> —André, *What Does a Woman Want?*

Before zeroing in on the relation of the hysteric and the mystic, I want to address Slavoj Žižek's view that feminine jouissance is a male fantasy. In *The Indivisible Remainder*, he states unambiguously that the "position of woman as Exception . . . is a masculine fantasy *par excellence*" (1996, p. 155); he works out this idea later on through an interpretation of *Breaking the Waves*. Focusing on Bess, in "Femininity between Goodness and Act," Žižek (1999) demonstrates how to avoid what he takes to be the fatal misreading of feminine jouissance as something outside the phallic order.

Žižek begins with the standard Lacanian reading that the "non-all . . . of woman means that not all of a woman is caught up in the phallic *jouissance*: She is always split between a part of her which accepts the role of a seductive masquerade aimed at fascinating the man, attracting the male gaze [!], and another part of her which resists being drawn into the dialectic of (male) desire, a mysterious *jouissance* beyond Phallus about which nothing can be said" (1999, p. 29). Yet, although Žižek eventually accepts the possibility that "not all of a woman" is dedicated to phallic jouissance (which I know at this point may be confusing), he regards women as primarily cooperating with male desire insofar as they attempt to be seductive, elusive of its operations, to play the game of resisting the dialectic of male desire. And (it is important to note), to Žižek, "the allusion to some unfathomable mysterious ingredient behind the mask is constitutive of the feminine seductive masquerade" (1999, p. 29). He offers this observation as a key step in his attempt at demystification of feminine jouissance. "[I]nherent to phallic economy," Žižek wants to stress, "is the reference to some mysterious X which remains forever out of its reach" (1999, p. 29).

But not only does this assertion fail to wipe out the concept of an enigmatic feminine jouissance independent of the phallic order; it also exemplifies what Lacan says happens on the male side. That is: the "man," through fantasy, places an object in the position of what cannot be glimpsed of the Other, and in this way the "man" approaches the object-cause of his desire. Insofar as a "man" does that, however, he does nothing to affect or effect what happens on the side of the "woman." Žižek, in other words, seems to assume that what happens on the left side of Lacan's sexuation graph accounts for the existence of the right, but this is simply to tell one side, the "man's" side, of the story.

As we know, and as Serge André has written, it is difficult to know anything about feminine jouissance; perhaps it takes perverse suffering for a "man" to approach it. But to say that feminine jouissance is hard or even impossible to access is not tantamount to saying it is a masculine fantasy. Moreover, while it may appear that exposing feminine jouissance as male fantasy (*were this*

*valid*) saves women from the sexism, if not the misogyny, entailed in a conception of "woman" as beyond, as "something more," as mystical, and, worst of all, as not existing, in my view it only diminishes "woman" all the more as well as appropriates the concept, absorbs the "woman's pole" (as always) into the man's, and collapses part of the sexuation graph, explaining the right side as a figment of the left's fantasmatic power.

In *Encore*, Lacan clearly, however, presents the "woman's pole" as standing on its own, as having an ontology of its own, even though "we can't talk about Woman (*La femme*)" (1998, p. 73). "*There is* a jouissance . . . of the body," Lacan writes, "beyond the phallus." "*There is* a jouissance that is hers (*à elle*), that belongs to that 'she' (*elle*) that doesn't exist and doesn't signify anything. *There is* a jouissance that is hers about which she herself perhaps knows nothing if not that she experiences it—that much she knows" (1998, p. 74, my emphases). It is because the ontology of "Woman" is Being rather than existence that her jouissance does not *exist*, not because men have fabricated it.

Žižek locates every speaking being on one side, whereas Lacan conceives of two discrete sides: "Every speaking being situates itself on one side or the other" (1998, p. 79). In "A Love Letter," after explaining the side of man, where fantasy motivates the barred subject to pursue an object *a*, Lacan focuses on "the other side," relating ~~Woman~~ "to the signifier of A insofar as it is barred" (1998, p. 80). Here, on the right side, the side of the mystic, the topic of feminine masquerade is not even broached, Lacan now being focused on what is beyond it as well as beyond the phallic function it is caught within. In fact, working against the view that "feminine jouissance" is merely a male fantasy, Lacan grounds feminine jouissance loosely in biology, as he establishes that the Other, "to which woman is fundamentally related," is "that to which half—. . . also roughly the biological proportion—half of all speaking beings refer" (1998, p. 81).

One could argue that mystical feminine jouissance is *Lacan's* fantasy, but Lacan does not present it as such. Rather, he accords Being to feminine jouissance, stating his belief in it, as if reciting

his version of the Nicene Creed: "I believe in the jouissance of woman insofar as it is extra." Here Lacan would seem to be on a theological level—"Why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as based on feminine jouissance?" (1998, p. 77)—rather than simply describing what men invent behind feminine masquerade. Lacan's mysticism, Lacan professes, "is something serious." And it is the mystic, not the "man" propelled by phallic *jouissance*, who has "the idea or sense that there must be a jouissance that is beyond" (1998, p. 76). The concept of woman's jouissance is much broader and weightier than the mere fabricated reference on the part of the man to some mysterious, forever elusive X, although it is crucial to keep in mind that the latter (male fantasy) taps into the former (feminine jouissance). It has to do with much more than "man's" sense of an enigma behind feminine masquerade: "woman's" jouissance is in fact an enigma because it is *more* than what the "man" can conceptualize. And as we have seen demonstrated in *Breaking the Waves*, it is "insofar as her jouissance is radically Other that woman has more of a relationship to God" (Lacan 1998, p. 83). It is in designating woman's jouissance as S(Ⱥ) that Lacan indicates "that God has not yet made his exit" (1998, p. 84).

Ironically, Žižek's own argument testifies to a feminine jouissance that subverts the integrity of the phallic function (by fully yielding to it) after all. In making the point that Bess's unconditional sacrifice, her full dedication to her partner's fulfillment, and her immanence undermine the phallic order, Žižek implies paradoxically that Bess *is* beyond, at least beyond male fantasy. Responding to his self-posed question of "In what . . . does the feminine *jouissance* 'beyond the phallus' consist?" Žižek writes that "she undermines the phallic economy and enters the domain of feminine *jouissance* by way of her very unconditional surrender to it, by way of renouncing every remnant of the inaccessible 'feminine mystique,' of some secret Beyond which allegedly eludes the male phallic grasp" (1999, p. 29). It seems at this point that Žižek and I are in agreement, together believing that there is a feminine jouissance that does not owe itself to male fantasy. But the question that once again divides us is whether Bess's jouissance (as representative

of feminine jouissance) is transcendent of, or immanent within, the phallic order. Does Bess renounce the Beyond (as Žižek proposes) or enter it?

Although, admittedly, Bess has little to do with the feminine masquerade (she is never seductive nor does she attempt to be), the mystical Bess hardly renounces Mystery. Nor does she disturb the phallic economy: Žižek reads Bess as illustrating that, deprived of "the fantasizing about some mysterious Beyond avoiding its grasp," "the phallic economy disintegrates" (1999, p. 30). For her mysterious disappearance, her final absence, like Antigone's at the end of the play, produces visible desire. It is only at this late stage in the film that Jan is overcome by a longing, a craving, an intense desire to be united with his lost love, whereas earlier, though loving enough, Jan had taken her somewhat for granted, had even been a bit parentally patronizing. It is Bess's attachment to the beyond, her Impossible Love (like that of the analyst's), that enables her to *support* the desiring phallic economy; being Beyond, she has the capacity to galvanize it. Therefore to reduce Bess as mystic to male fantasy is dangerously to risk crippling the system, which Bess and the Besses of the world, Antigone, analysts, uphold. But we need not worry, for it is also to be on the side of the "man," who can only think in terms of object *a*, and who, especially if he is an obsessional, refuses typically to recognize the "object as related to the Other" (Fink 1997, p. 118) but must neutralize or annihilate her/the Other. (Žižek is no pervert.)

In sacrificing herself for Jan, Bess becomes his object *a*. Through literal transcendence, rather than immanence, she becomes the Mystery that keeps him upright. Rather than Bess being Jan's production, her death is responsible for his resurrection. Moreover, there is just one of this kind of Woman. Nowhere does Lacan indicate that there is a mysterious woman whom men fantasize into existence and in addition a completely ingratiating, accommodating, unmysterious woman subversive of, while incorporated within, the phallic system. I am not, then, denying that the Woman who doesn't exist takes the form of fantasy for men. But I am arguing that man's fantasy is a reduced form of, as it is predi-

cated on, the truth, to Lacan, of the Being of the Woman who doesn't exist.

## IV.

> *[A] peerless or fatherless . . . excitability leads hysterics to crack the phallic framework that supports their cognitive congruence. They counteract it with an* exuberant affect *that can be either distressing or ecstatic, but whose upsurge comes forth through a lack of symbolic synthesis. And then hysterics disintegrate this acquired, cultivated, and fawned-upon coherence in order to oppose it to the woeful delights of their unnameable bodies, if not to the ineffable night of the mystics or the cult of disconnection or death.*
>
> —Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*

Finally, I want to take a harder theoretical look at the relation between the Woman who doesn't exist—that is, the mystic, or the ~~Woman~~ in Love—and the hysteric. Žižek seems to conceive of the mystic as a psychotic; yet we know that s/he has passed through the phallic function, which the psychotic has foreclosed. At the end of his essay, Žižek makes a suggestion as to how a married woman can avoid falling into psychosis (she must accept her partner's castration and fantasize about "Another Man who would be the phallus itself" [1999, p. 37]). I did not think psychosis could be fallen into; nevertheless, the pitfall Žižek describes is precisely the one I have been pointing to as the hysteric's self-made trap. At the end of "Femininity between Goodness and Act," Žižek describes "the consequences of actually encountering" "another Man who would be the phallus itself" as "catastrophic" (1999, p. 37).

Because *Breaking the Waves* seems to bring together the ~~Woman~~ in Love and the hysteric (for all the reasons I have given) as well as because Serge André describes the hysteric turning to Love as a way of solving her problem of the missing signifier of femininity, I have tried to put the hysteric into relation with the ~~Woman~~ in Love. It is the case, and it must be granted at the outset, that *because* Love resides in the real, the hysteric—intent upon

dissatisfaction—veers toward the symbolic side of love. How can a woman devoted to dissatisfaction, that is, to the lack of fulfillment of desire, be located in Other jouissance? It would seem a blatant contradiction. Nasio, in fact, puts the hysteric, who "clashes with and injures herself against the limit of an impossible sexual relation," inevitably finding herself "drawn toward discontent," on the one side and the mystic on the other (1998, p. 36). Nasio regards the ecstatic experience of the mystic as an abandonment to exactly what even a sexually orgasmic hysteric refuses—infinite pleasure. Nonetheless, the hysteric may very well similarly abandon herself as she is sucked into "an ever greater dedication to the other" (André 1999, p. 128). That is: insofar as the hysteric fails to fail, she "succeeds" to become a mystic by sacrificing all for Love. Her ostensible wish all along, after all, has been to coalesce with the master's power. She may injure herself so severely or thoroughly by coming up against the bounds of the impossible sexual relation that she passes into one. So, again, we can speak at least of a trajectory from hysteria to mysticism or Love, while keeping the two concepts distinct.

However, in thinking even somewhat commonsensically about hysteria and femininity, the condition achieved by the mystic, the Woman who doesn't exist, or ~~Woman~~ in Love, we might very well imagine that hysteria, being a psychic structure more common among women than men, would correlate with Lacan's "femininity." In his seminar *The Psychoses*, Lacan comments that "the woman-hysteric" poses the question "*What is it to be a woman?*" (1993, p. 175). It is a feminine identification, we must recall, that the hysteric is desperately seeking. While in *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis* Fink (1997) stresses the hysteric's dedication to a lack of fulfillment of desire, Fink himself, in his first book, *The Lacanian Subject*, mentions that because "feminine structure proves that the phallic function has its limits and that the signifier isn't everything," this structure "bears close affinities to hysteria as defined in the hysteric's discourse" (1995, p. 107). That is: like the hysteric eager to locate the lack in the Other, femininity exposes the inadequacy of the phallic function and its ac-

companying signifier. Is the hysteric not the Woman who does, and does not, want to exist? She wants a feminine identification, while to achieve one is not to be identified. Is, then, the relation of the hysteric to femininity paradoxical? The hysteric wants it; yet it is the last thing she wants. Also, if desire is to Lacan "a defense against going beyond a limit in *jouissance*" (1977, p. 322), might we not conversely think of a defense against desire, which the hysteric in a sense puts up to avoid satisfied desire, as itself jouissance? One might of course conceive of the hysteric's so-called defense against desire as always already intrinsic to desire—"it can be argued," as André reminds us, "that the very nature of desire entails something hysterical" (1999, p. 130)—except that all desiring subjects are not hysterics.

Desiring nonfulfillment, the hysteric, one could posit, avoids desire and wallows in a jouissance of dissatisfaction. In *New Maladies of the Soul*, Kristeva (1995) presents Jeanne Guyon (1649–1717), "one of the last great French mystics" (p. 64), as her first example of a hysteric. Guyon, not surprisingly, took pleasure in pain, in her pursuit of love that entailed submission to God. Kristeva highlights the hysteric's quest for "a maximal symbolic and psychic jouissance," as the hysteric postulates the futility of her desire (p. 70). The paradox would seem to be that while the hysteric refuses to obtain satisfaction by consummating desire, she obtains dissatisfaction, a variation on the very satisfaction/jouissance she desperately avoids.

In the spirit of my own explication of hysteria thus far, Julien Quackelbeen directly addresses the question of the relation of desiring subjectivity and hysteria by distinguishing what is pathological about hysteria. Quackelbeen's "Hysterical Discourse: Between the Belief in Man and the Cult of Woman" suggests that the hysteric surpasses a state of confinement with "the Freudian father of *Totem and Taboo*," with "the exception that determines the rule," in that "she also demands that every man be its embodiment. . . . [For the hysteric] believes in the hidden existence of a totalizing knowing about the truth of her object *a*, although she has never had the least experience of it" (1994, p. 131). Making the relation

of the hysteric to the Woman who doesn't exist more than merely a potential trajectory, Quakelbeen proposes that the hysteric thus renders the impossible, in a way, possible, by claiming that "the other possesses the unifying signifier for Woman"; *and so* "she becomes devoted to the cult of Woman" (p. 131), refusing the nonexistence of the sexual relation. Of course, to insist on such a signifier from the place of the ~~Woman~~ is a contradiction and therefore the hysteric is engaged in a losing battle. Likewise, her belief in Man forever remains just that—a belief. At the risk of seeming to reduce the spiritual meaning of *Breaking the Waves*, this is, in fact, how I take Bess's statement, "I can believe," spoken boldly as an answer to Dr. Richardson's question, "What's your talent?": that is, as testimony to her hysterical/mystical faith in a (Lacanian) sexual relation.

Needless to say, the object *a* always falsely promises the existence of a sexual relation. But in the case of the hysteric—for whom, again, the object *a* is written into the place of truth, the place she may come to occupy—this dream is insisted upon. Instead of facing the truth, the hysteric complains about, blames, the Other; there is to her no sexual relation only because the Other continues to be inadequate, after all. Hence her fantasy persists and can be in a sense forced to materialize, as she—offering herself as a phallicized object, as what will complete the Other, "install him as Other without flaw" (Quackelbeen 1994, p. 136)—falls into the hole of the Other, to become a Woman who doesn't exist, a ~~Woman~~ in Love, a ~~Woman~~ in a sexual relation with God.

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# 9

# *Jane Campion's Jouissance:* Holy Smoke *and Feminist Film Theory*

HILARY NERONI

One measure of feminism's apparent contemporary evanescence is the reluctance of women to embrace the moniker of "feminist." This reluctance, which attests to the postfeminist nature of the times, manifests itself quite often in the film world today, even in places where we would expect a hearty embrace of the term.[1] The hegemony of postfeminism has led even independent director Jane Campion to insist that she is not a feminist filmmaker. Yet, Campion's reluctance to identify her filmmaking as feminist should in no way

1. Joseph McGinty Nichol's *Charlie's Angels* (2000) seems the quintessential postfeminist text because the three angels are both agents within the narrative and objects of the male gaze. The women use their good looks to fulfill their desires and accomplish feats once reserved for male heroes. The film is replete with moments of the camera admiring and examining the women's beauty, but in this case, the women control the camera rather than allowing it to control them. They embody the object as a powerful position, one in which they can manipulate men and have what they want. Drew Barrymore's producer status on this picture added to its female-driven feel, but she constantly insists that she does not consider herself a "feminist."

blind us to the way that her films constitute a new kind of feminism—a feminist politics for our postfeminist epoch. Indeed, Jane Campion's *Holy Smoke* (2000) forces us to reconsider altogether where the terrain of the political lies.

Campion's reluctance to claim the term "feminist filmmaker" stems in part from the prescriptive nature of feminism and feminist film theory in the 1970s and 1980s. This prescriptive dimension of feminist film theory manifested itself most conspicuously in the work surrounding Laura Mulvey, with its insistence on combating patriarchal narrative and filmic conventions with new feminist alternatives. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey explains the process of viewer identification, in which the viewer identifies with the male hero because the camera identifies with the male hero. The camera focuses on what the male hero is looking at and to this extent also follows the active male hero through the filmic text. This camera/male hero alignment forces the woman into the position of the object of the male gaze. Mulvey's argument is that the viewer (both male and female) derives pleasure from this process of identification and thus derives pleasure from objectifying the woman and viewing her as a passive object. To break this cycle of oppression, Mulvey says, "The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked. Not in favor of a reconstructed new pleasure, which cannot exist in the abstract, not of intellectualized unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the fictional narrative film" (1985, p. 306; see also Johnston 1985). To carry this out, filmmakers had not only to break Hollywood filmic codes and invert traditional narrative structures, but also work to subvert all viewer pleasure. This early feminist film theory appropriated psychoanalysis as a tool for both criticizing and reconceiving filmic practice, and while revolutionary at the time, it quickly became limiting. The problem with this approach wasn't that it employed psychoanalysis toward feminist ends—the project of psychoanalysis is, to my mind, in no way at odds with that of feminism—but that it viewed psychoanalysis as prescriptive rather than investigative. In this way, it wrenched psychoanaly-

sis out of its proper domain. In short, feminist film theory took psychoanalysis as a tool for outlining a feminist filmic practice rather than as a tool for discovering one already implicit within filmic practice itself, a path that would encourage experimentation and allow for flexibility.[2]

A decisive turn away from this prescriptive theorizing occurred in 1994, however, with the publication of Joan Copjec's *Read My Desire*. In this work, Copjec moves feminist film theory toward the investigative dimension of psychoanalysis, thus offering a psychoanalytic film theory that reopens the door for feminist analysis and filmmaking. The transformation that Copjec authors becomes most apparent in her reconception of the gaze, which was the central focus of the feminist film theory of the 1970s and 1980s. Copjec argues that the gaze is not—as Mulvey suggested—a static camera look but rather, in Lacanian terms, the stain in the picture looking back at the viewer (the *objet petit a*). Mulvey's understanding of the gaze (the camera's approximation of the viewer's visual position) suggests that the viewer has mastery over the image, that is, that the viewer relates to the screen as he or she does to the mirror. Copjec, on the other hand, points out that in this way film theory has misread Lacan. Lacan, Copjec explains, saw a potential screen in every mirror, which is to say, a potential disruption of the subject's sense of mastery. If the mirror is a screen, then the subject does not have mastery over the visual field. As Copjec points out, "At the moment the gaze is discerned, the image, the entire visual field, takes on a terrifying alterity. It loses its 'belong-to-me aspect' and suddenly assumes the function of a screen" (1994, p. 35). Because the image becomes a screen, the subject necessarily confronts it with a question: What is being concealed from me?

2. In this sense, early feminist film theory took the approach of American ego psychology instead of psychoanalysis proper. In the course of ego psychology, the analyst offers the image of a healthy ego as a goal for the analysand. This goal offers the analysand a prescription for the direction in which the therapy should proceed. Psychoanalysis, in contrast, does not have a concrete aim. The point of the psychoanalytic sessions is the investigation of the analysand's neurosis, not what might result from that investigation.

The Lacanian gaze is that concealed space that provokes the subject; it is the *objet petit a* (the locus of our desire).[3] Copjec does agree with Mulvey, however, that film approximates the viewer's experience of sight, but this leads Copjec to suggest that the true Lacanian gaze is concealed within the filmic image. This update of the filmic gaze shifts the focus from how the viewer masters the film image to the multiple ways the viewer interacts with the film form. Copjec's focus on the *objet petit a* emphasizes the disruptive moments of film, the points of trauma enacted in the filmic experience. Copjec's conception of the Lacanian gaze permits us to think of feminist filmmaking in much broader terms than Mulvey's conception allowed, making way for a type of analysis and a type of filmmaking that is less wedded to particular prescriptive conventions (and how to break these conventions) and more concerned with antagonism (the ways that film shatters the security of our symbolic identities). This means that radical filmmaking need not come in one particular package but instead might be accomplished through any (including mainstream) filmic technique, narrative form, and/or content, as long as it is investigative. In investigation—both in psychoanalysis and detective work—the investigator is most often seeking the cause of a traumatic event or that trauma itself, regardless of the path her investigation takes her on. The radical filmmaker similarly, regardless of the route she takes, seeks out conflicts, fissures, or traumas in the social order that reveal ideology or have an impact on ideology. The prescriptive method of criticism or filmmaking, however, limits an encounter with trauma (or limits our interpretation of that investigation) while the investigative approach allows such an encounter to occur. And it is the encounter with trauma that lays bare the functioning of ideology and allows us to see the possibility for political change. This kind of approach suggests, therefore, that film theory can be alert to the political dimension of cinema—and can be politically engaged—without being prescriptive.

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3. As Lacan points out in *Seminar XI*, "*The* objet a *in the field of the visible is the gaze*" (1978, p. 105, his emphasis).

Taking Copjec's reworking of psychoanalytic film theory as our starting point, we can look at what Copjec doesn't explore—how the disruptiveness of the *objet petit a* might manifest itself filmically and its possible political ramifications. Approaching Jane Campion's films with an eye for the *objet petit a* reveals them (and especially her film *Holy Smoke* [1999]) as important examples of feminist filmmaking, despite Campion's refusal of this label. The feminism of her films manifests itself precisely in depictions of the *objet petit a* and its disruptive effect on these films, the social reality, and even on their narrative structure. Campion often depicts the *objet petit a* in the form of feminine jouissance. As Renata Salecl makes clear, this equation is already implicit in the idea of the *objet petit a*: "that which arouses the subject's desire for another subject is the very specific mode of the Other's *jouissance* embodied in the object *a*" (1998, p. 64). This jouissance is not an experience of pleasure, but rather it is connected to a momentary break from those symbolic fictions that constitute identity. A more prescriptive theoretical approach, like Mulvey's, does not account for unpleasurable pleasure (or jouissance, an experience of pleasure in pain). Campion's films depict moments of feminine jouissance and, even more importantly, they investigate the effects of these moments. More often than not, feminine jouissance has a political effect: Campion's heroines evince an ability to dwell in a moment of jouissance, and this forces other characters to reevaluate their traditional gendered roles while it also lays bare the fantasmatic underside of ideology. In other words, feminine jouissance is what does not fit within Campion's filmic world—and yet it is the central feature of that world. It acts as the stain in the filmic picture. By depicting feminine jouissance as this stain, Campion's films reveal its political possibilities. Jouissance is itself never directly political, but, as Lacan says in *Seminar XX*, feminine jouissance "isn't everything that isn't politics" (1998, p. 76).[4]

4. Lacan makes this claim about mysticism, but immediately prior to this point he links mysticism to feminine jouissance.

In Campion's films, jouissance has political ramifications because it competes with the world of symbolic power. The characters experiencing jouissance are too enthralled in their activity to care about the powers—or expectations—that usually govern their lives. Normally the subject regulates most—if not all—of her/his behavior according to what she/he assumes the Other wants. Jouissance, however, produces a time when the subject is completely unconcerned with the Other's desire. This disengagement from the Other's desire is what makes jouissance upsetting or unsettling for those who are not involved in it. In Campion's *The Piano* (1993), for example, Ada McGrath's (Holly Hunter) jouissance, her piano playing, competes in several ways with the world of symbolic power. Ada is the mail order bride of Alisdair Stewart (Sam Neill), a New Zealand farmer. Since Ada already has a daughter, she has the status of "damaged goods," and Stewart considers himself magnanimous for accepting her. Ada's main concern throughout the film, however, is playing her piano. When she plays, she seems to be transported to another world; she can't pay attention to anyone around her (including her daughter) nor can she keep track of time. When she plays the piano, she is unable to care about the social expectations that swirl around her (such as acting like a wife, a mother, or a respected citizen of that social environment).[5] Ada's experience of and devotion to her jouissance has an unraveling effect on Stewart, the patriarch. He becomes obsessed with containing and restricting her, to the point where he barricades her into the house, an effort that concretizes the social rule of patriarchal ownership. Ada's jouissance makes it painfully clear that Stewart can never own her, that no one—and especially no social rule—can lay claim to the experience she has while playing the piano. Thus, *The Piano* (like most of Campion's films)

5. Ada's enjoyment of sex with Baines (Harvey Keitel) is of a piece with her enjoyment of the piano. In this sense, Baines is not the source for Ada's attainment of jouissance and freedom but the vehicle through which she can attain them.

revolves around female jouissance and the way in which jouissance reveals the limits of patriarchy.[6]

Most narratives, in contrast, present a traditional path on which the heroine pursues what she desires, and the resolution provides some closure. This allows the viewer to experience the anxiety and pleasure of unfulfilled desire and then the satisfaction of mastery over the recalcitrant object when the conflict is resolved. However, any resolution of desire and achievement of mastery is ultimately fantasmatic. For the nature of desire is to perpetuate itself, and the fantasmatic resolution it seeks never actually delivers THE *objet petit a*. This is why obtaining what one desires never brings the anticipated satisfaction. Once one resolution is obtained, desire turns its energy toward another object, so that the resolution is just a stand-in for the larger self-perpetuating action of desire. The *objet petit a* is that ultimate object that drives the subject's desire, and the subject sees it as replete with enjoyment, embodying

6. Pointing out the feminist nature of Campion's investigation of the ramifications of feminine jouissance may seem dangerously similar to calling for a feminism based on narcissism. However, feminine jouissance, I would argue, is quite distinct from narcissism, though both seem to involve a similar turning away from the symbolic order toward the self. The difference lies in narcissism's complete investment in the symbolic order. The narcissistic subject takes his/her own ego as love object, and this ego is the product of an imaginary misrecognition that occurs within a symbolic structure. Rather than a momentary disengagement from the desire of the Other, as in feminine jouissance, narcissism simply displaces the desire of the Other onto its own ego. This is a distinction that Freud fails to notice in his discussion of the female tendency toward narcissism. According to Freud, "with the onset of puberty the maturing of the female sexual organs, which up till then have been in a condition of latency, seems to bring about an intensification of the original narcissism, and this is unfavourable to the development of a true object-choice with its accompanying overvaluation. Women, especially if they grow up with good looks, develop a certain self-contentment which compensates them for the social restrictions that are imposed upon them in their choice of object" (1953, pp. 88–89). What Freud here calls "self-contentment" might also be an experience of feminine jouissance, and one must distinguish between this experience (of losing one's symbolically situated identity) and that of narcissism (turning back toward that identity).

the ultimate enjoyment. The myth or ideology surrounding the *objet petit a* is that desire can eventually be satiated. Most narratives aim at this secret jouissance that lies at the heart of the *objet petit a*, and the fantasmatic resolution is an attempt to stage a scene in which the subject would be able to access this enjoyment. Thus, the fantasmatic resolution both provides pleasure and allows the subject to believe in the power of desire. The key to this fantasmatic resolution in the majority of mainstream Hollywood narratives is its short duration. The entire narrative drive leads up to the resolution, but the film delivers this resolution in a few short minutes before the credits roll. Nora Ephron's popular *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) is a perfect example of this structure. The film follows two strangers searching for love who meet only in the last minute of the film, and this meeting appears to materialize the *objet petit a*. Action films also often rely on this last minute romantic union as a way of underscoring the fantasmatic resolution to narrative antagonisms.[7] The brief nature of the common Hollywood ending allows for the fantasy of resolution to remain especially strong as it provides a glimpse of the ultimate satisfaction but does not have to reveal what happens after the momentary conclusion. In this way, such films do not have to explore the potency of this resolution. They do not have to reveal that the achievement of resolution—although it may look like it—is not the *objet petit a* but instead an inadequate stand-in. Indeed, the filmic narrative delivers this resolution only briefly in order to carefully control the viewer's experience throughout the film.

Narrative theorists such as Edward Branigan point out that narrative is about control, especially about the control of knowledge. Branigan explains, "Narration is the overall regulation and distribution of knowledge which determines *how* and when the spectator acquires knowledge, that is, how the spectator is able to

7. To choose just a few popular examples, in John McTiernan's *Die Hard* (1988), Andrew Davis's *Under Siege* (1992), Jan De Bont's *Speed* (1994), and Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996), the male hero solves the crisis and finds true love in the last few minutes of the film.

know what he or she comes to know in a narrative" (1992, p. 76). What is important about this "regulation and distribution of knowledge" is its link to desire. In other words, narrative is the regulation and distribution of desire. Narrative presents a larger conflict, which engages the viewer's desire, and then proceeds to reveal partial resolutions, which hint toward the satisfaction of desire. These partial resolutions in turn suggest that the final resolution will tie up all the loose ends and answer all the questions posed throughout the film. Implicit in the presenting of this fantasmatic resolution (in whatever form) is that the narrative holds back the knowledge of the resolution until the end of the film. The film holds back that object that is replete with enjoyment. This, of course, sustains the viewer's desire throughout the film. The unique nature of Campion's films is that she stages the "object that is replete with enjoyment" at the beginning of the film rather than holding it back to sustain our desire. This allows Campion to explore how the characters react to the *objet petit a*, thus freeing her from presenting her audience with a clear path of desire throughout the entire film. Thus, Campion's films provide us with examples of a plot and film form that are less concerned with following the path of desire than with dwelling in a particular experience and the web of relationships that are connected to that experience.[8] Her films are never about female characters in search of this experience of jouissance, but rather about how it disrupts and reconfigures the surrounding social reality. Campion's *Sweetie* is the most dramatic example. In *Sweetie*, every narrative development occurs in reaction to Sweetie's traumatic jouissance, even those movements that occur before Sweetie enters into the narrative. For instance, her mother's departure from the family and journey into the outback represent a clear attempt to gain some distance from Sweetie, even though at the time of this departure the film has yet to introduce Sweetie as a character. Through the character of Sweetie, Campion reveals the effect that feminine jouissance has on subjects with an

8. Campion herself has at times described her films as presenting an experience rather than a story.

investment in the symbolic order. Depicting an experience (of jouissance) rather than a plot following a path toward resolution allows Campion to investigate the political nature of feminine jouissance and is at the core of what makes Campion's films radically feminist.

Campion sees that feminine jouissance holds the key to feminist politics because of its antagonistic relationship to narrative. It does not fit smoothly within the discursive flow of narrative but instead brings this flow to a halt. Every attempt to include feminine jouissance within a narrative structure has the effect of destabilizing this structure and arresting its movement. Feminine jouissance continually remains a foreign element in any narrative. As Lacan points out, "If what I claim is true—namely, that a woman is not-whole—there is always something in her that escapes discourse" (1998, p. 33). This "something in her that escapes discourse" is nothing other than her jouissance. In the experience of feminine jouissance, the subject becomes the site of the ineffable. In his *Seminar XIV* on the logic of fantasy, Lacan draws attention to this irreducibility of feminine jouissance to discourse. According to Lacan, "neither man nor woman has been capable of articulating the least thing that holds up on the subject of feminine enjoyment" (1967, my translation). We can't articulate anything sensible about feminine jouissance; it occupies a position irreducible to any narrativization.

Feminine jouissance has this antagonistic relationship to narrative because it emerges out of the site of social antagonism. That is to say, the enjoying woman is enjoying the empty space within the social order. Her jouissance derives from the failure of the symbolic structure, from its failure to be a whole. If there were a universe of discourse—if discourse could constitute a whole—then there would be no possibility, no space, for the emergence of feminine jouissance. But because discourse always stumbles over some Real antagonism and remains incomplete, feminine jouissance has a place where it can exist. In contrast to the experience of feminine jouissance, everyday life operates through the repression of this antagonism. We turn to narrative in order to obscure it. The

fantasmatic dimension of narrative allows it to transform the Real antagonism into a contingent barrier that we can overcome. As Slavoj Žižek notes, this is the function of narrative as such. He claims, "The answer to the question 'Why do we tell stories?' is that *narrative as such* emerges in order to resolve some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism" (1997, pp. 10–11, Žižek's emphasis). The antagonistic relationship between feminine jouissance and narrative stems from the former's privileged link to the repressed antagonism, and it allows the experience of feminine jouissance to mark the limits of every ideological narrative. In this sense, highlighting moments of feminine jouissance and their impact on the narrativity itself—what we see throughout Jane Campion's work—provides the basis for a distinctive feminist political project.

This political project has its recent culmination in *Holy Smoke*. In *Holy Smoke*, Ruth (Kate Winslet) joins a religious cult in India, and her middle-class Australian family tries to save her. Ruth's mother makes a trip to India and convinces Ruth that her father is dying in order to trick Ruth into coming back to Australia. The family hires a cult expert from America, P.J. Waters (Harvey Keitel), to deprogram Ruth. The rest of the film chronicles P.J. and Ruth's interactions in a small cabin in the middle of the outback. *Holy Smoke* is about Ruth, but it is not so much about the emotional trajectory she follows as it is about how the other characters react to her, especially to her moments of jouissance. The major turning points in the movement of the narrative are triggered by Ruth's jouissance (moments of complete symbolic uncertainty) rather than by the revelation of new information. New pieces of information, new knowledge, provide the viewer with a sense of mastery in a traditional narrative, but Ruth's moments of jouissance detract from the viewer's sense of mastery. In other words, the viewer is as unsure about how to approach Ruth's jouissance as are the other characters in the film.

Campion's focus on Ruth's experiences of jouissance affects both the narrative trajectory and the film form, producing a very

experimental filmic structure. Campion's most experimental films (in terms of editing and shot selection) come out of her collaboration with cinematographer Sally Bongers, who worked on *Peel*, *Sweetie*, and *Holy Smoke*. In these films, she and Bongers link scenes together in unconventional ways, allow the landscape and the setting to express the inner struggle of the character sometimes more than the dialogue or plot, and include surreal breaks from traditional realism in order to depict a character's experience. These surreal breaks play an important filmic role in suggesting an experience of feminine jouissance and thus the *objet petit a*. In other words, the experimental interruptions of the filmic form mark and create a space for the eruptions of jouissance. The first scene depicting Ruth dwelling in a moment of jouissance comes—characteristically for Campion—close to the beginning of the film. Ruth's friend recounts the moment to Ruth's family in the form of a flashback. The film shows that Ruth went to India as a tourist and wanted to experience the teachings of a religious guru as part of her "Indian adventure." Ruth drags her friend into the temple, and to the friend's horror, Ruth becomes thoroughly entranced by the guru. Though she is somewhat unhappy at home, Ruth is not purposely searching for a transformative experience here; on the contrary, she seems to fall into it. The filmic presentation is the salient feature of this moment. As Ruth immerses herself in the moment, the image blurs into a tunnel of swirling color and light that distorts everything within the frame except the guru, who is at the end of the tunnel. We then see a reverse shot with Ruth at the center of a similar tunnel, followed by a close-up of the guru's finger touching her forehead. His touch seems to open a hole in Ruth's forehead where a third eye appears with light pouring out of it. The camera then pulls back to reveal Ruth with tears streaming down her face and light swirling around her body. This striking, surreal image, coupled with the faint sounds of the crowd around Ruth and the foregrounded sounds of Ruth's breathing and moaning, allows the audience to understand the moment as one where the normal restrictions and perceptions of reality have fallen away for Ruth. Despite the pleading of her friend (who throughout this scene has

remained at the edge of the frame desperately trying to retrieve Ruth), she is experiencing a kind of jouissance to which no one else is privy.

Some might see this instance of jouissance as tied completely to the figure of the guru/master, as the phallus rearing its head in the worst of ways. It is clear that the guru plays a central role in Ruth's experience of jouissance here. But it seems to be less the guru's teaching or discourse and more the spectacle of the religious ceremony that triggers her jouissance. This is not the first time Ruth has entered the temple or encountered this religion, which suggests that Ruth is not falling under the sway of a new ideology with its attendant master. The filmic presentation here is the key to understanding this difference. Campion's shooting, editing, and special effects clearly emphasize Ruth's surreal subjective experience of the guru rather than a desire to find a new religious belief. Hence, this moment is filmically marked as jouissance rather than as a kind of conversion.

Moreover, this moment of feminine jouissance indicates a point of disruption in the symbolic structure that informs Ruth's identity. While she experiences jouissance, she becomes completely indifferent to the world that she had inhabited. As Lacan points out in *Seminar X*, "the jouissance of the woman is in herself and is not connected to the Other" (1963). It is a jouissance "beyond the phallus" because it frees Ruth from the concerns and blandishments of the symbolic order. As such, this moment of feminine jouissance is an eruption of non-sense within a universe of meaning. Campion's surrealistic depiction of the experience—which differs filmically from any other scene in *Holy Smoke*—reveals its non-sensical quality. According to Lacan, what characterizes jouissance is its irreducibility to a symbolic meaning. As he says in *Seminar XX*, "jouissance is what serves no purpose" (1998, p. 3). Lacan defines jouissance as purposeless in order to stress what becomes evident in Campion's depiction of Ruth: Jouissance can have a profoundly destabilizing effect on the symbolic structure in which it erupts. Which is not to say that jouissance—even feminine jouissance—exists wholly outside of any symbolic coordinates.

Ruth's experience of jouissance reveals how feminine jouissance can derive from an intersection of symbolic fictions—how it initially emerges out of symbolic fictions. The building block of the symbolic order is the signifier, and Lacan suggests that the signifier not only brings jouissance to a halt but also causes it. That is, though jouissance seems to erupt spontaneously, it actually derives from the very symbolic order that it throws into question. It is an eruption of non-sense that indicates either a hole in the symbolic or an overpresence of the symbolic. This overpresence, or overlapping of symbolic fictions, can cause a momentary eclipse of their power over the subject. In *Holy Smoke*, this moment comes when Ruth's Western beliefs collide with her belief in Eastern mysticism. Ruth's moment of jouissance, therefore, is in some way triggered by a colonial dream, since it is wrapped up in the current trend of largely white upper-class people around the world practicing yoga and other forms of meditation that are linked to Eastern religions and practices. This contemporary version of fetishization becomes even more complicated when added to the way the Australian relationship with India is in some ways also channeled through an identification with England and its own history of colonialization in India. Thus, Australians can identify with the oppression that India experienced from England but also with the oppressor (whom white Australians have a history of looking to for ideals of proper social behavior). Placing Ruth in India for this initial moment of jouissance reveals that the impetus for political challenge can even come out of the fantasies that sustain the status quo and support ideology. In *Holy Smoke*, Ruth's feminine jouissance is not a moment of transcendence—where she realizes the ideological nature of her belief system—but rather a moment of symbolic identity unraveling or falling away.

The political dimension of feminine jouissance lies in its destabilization of the prevailing social reality that sustains the ideology of the family. Thus, the fundamental effect of Ruth's experience is revealed through her family's reaction. The family cannot just ig-

nore Ruth and let her go; they want to obliterate her jouissance and bring her back into her proper social role. Ruth's jouissance reveals the family's ludicrous adherence to symbolic fictions. Only by obliterating her jouissance can they go on with their own symbolic roles: their symbolic identities are dependent upon Ruth taking up her symbolic identity again. Ruth's Mum (Julie Hamilton) is especially consumed with the need to retrieve her. When Ruth's Dad (Tim Robertson) seems rather apathetic about spending a lot of money on retrieving her, Ruth's mother explains, "She's our golden girl." Ruth is her mother's ideal self. When in India, attempting to bring Ruth back, her mother appears even more awkward than at home. She sweats and her hair clings to her; she puts a handkerchief over her mouth to breathe and over a bottle to drink. She feels completely horrified by the different culture that she is confronted with. She seems about to faint as much from her own horror of this culture as from the heat. Ruth, on the other hand, is not too hot and is completely comfortable in her surroundings. Her mother desperately wants to "save" Ruth from a place that she cannot and does not want to understand. All her mother's fears of India indicate that she is afraid of the jouissance that she perceives there. This manifests itself in a fear of germs and a severe reaction to the heat, which are also substitutes for her fear of Ruth's jouissance. Her initial obsession to retrieve Ruth, and her panicked reaction to India, lays bare the mother's own retreat from jouissance and motivates her need to eliminate Ruth's jouissance. To do this, she hopes to prove that Ruth's experience of jouissance can be overcome and forgotten. At home, Ruth's mother occupies traditional roles: she keeps her children in line and ignores the indiscretions of her husband. When things become unbearable she turns to religion or food to temper the trauma of her experience, or she relies on living through her daughter's experiences. If she loses Ruth, her mundane life would be painfully revealed, and this further fuels her desire to retrieve Ruth and obliterate her jouissance. Feminine jouissance in this film, then, has the effect of revealing the restricted role of the mother in this contemporary liberal family.

If her obsession with deprogramming Ruth reveals her mother's investment in her symbolic identity, then her father's apathy reveals the ineffectual nature of the patriarch. Ruth's father has a macho and entitled air about him. He expects everyone to respect him and act according to their role in the family. When the family forces Ruth to work with the cult deprogrammer, she begins swearing and flaunting her own power, and in response her father raises his voice and demands that she behave herself around him and her mother. To retaliate, Ruth wheels around and asks her father about the secretary with whom he is having an affair. This clearly reveals the patriarch to be as disingenuous as he is accusing her of being, and it completely undermines his power in the situation by exposing what usually remains hidden, or at least unspoken. The most telling event occurs, however, right after the family has retrieved Ruth back from India on the pretense that her father is dying; the men in the family encircle her to keep her from running. In a moment of rage, her father pulls off Ruth's sari, an important symbol of her new identity, and in response, Ruth pulls off her father's toupee. Obviously, her father's toupee also acts as a symbol of his identity, a symbol indicating he does not live up to the symbolic ideal that he supposedly embodies. Ruth knows in this instance how to reveal the patriarch as stupid, as a meaningless signifier. In this way, *Holy Smoke* works constantly to reveal that our different social positions are all just so many fictions and none of them rests on a firm foundation. The key to these revelations is Ruth's initial embrace of jouissance. Though Ruth no longer inhabits the former moment of jouissance, she nonetheless continues to profess her fidelity to it, and this profoundly disturbs the family. It disturbs them because it makes clear their own ambivalence toward both jouissance and symbolic identity. The family gathers to save Ruth, but Campion depicts a family that cannot stay focused and one that is always looking for distractions even in the face of what they consider to be a trauma—Ruth's brainwashing. They are constantly playing in the pool, going to the bars, eating, and watching television, even during serious family meetings. In other words, they seem to be doing everything they can to distract themselves from

the constraints of their own symbolic fictions and from the trauma of Ruth's jouissance. Jouissance makes obvious the lack of harmony and coherence in such symbolic fictions by revealing the ease with which those fictions can melt away or be rendered meaningless.

In an effort to offset her jouissance, the family calls in P.J. Waters, a cult expert from America, to deprogram Ruth. If Ruth embodies feminine jouissance, P.J. represents the phallic counterpart. He is an archetypal phallic figure, perfectly suited to stamp out Ruth's feminine jouissance and return her to the security of a proper symbolic identity. The family believes completely in P.J.'s abilities. They constantly remark that he is an expert, "the top man in the field." But Campion depicts P.J.'s phallic authority in a way that reveals its underlying weakness—its dependence on fantasy. P.J.'s introduction, his arrival in the airport, establishes his phallic authority in the most emphatic terms and also stresses its fantasmatic dimension. The camera zeros in on his sunglasses, cowboy boots, and jeans with belt and large belt buckle. P.J. is the autonomous and solitary American cowboy riding into town to stamp out evil. Campion shoots this scene in a mock-heroic style, depicting P.J. striding through the airport as if it were a small Western town in the nineteenth century. This mock-heroic mood becomes even more apparent as P.J. approaches a group of travelers who are frantically tugging at a seemingly inoperative luggage cart machine. P.J. brushes the travelers aside, easily retrieves a cart, and then hands it to an elderly lady. After this gallant gesture, P.J. twirls a luggage cart around for himself, in the way that a cowboy might twirl his six-shooter. Campion films this gesture in slow motion, which adds to its flare and the mock-heroic mood of the scene.

However, the most important element in this scene is the (nondiegetic) music that serves as the background for P.J.'s arrival. Campion uses Neil Diamond's "I Am, I Said," a song that underlies P.J.'s position as a phallic figure but at the same time shows the dubious state of such a figure. "I Am, I Said" sounds triumphant—a proclamation of identity that seems to indicate an identity that is *sui generis*. However, the autonomy suggested by the

song is actually false; it is a wholly empty proclamation.[9] The lyrics detail this: "I am, I said. To no one there, and no one heard at all." The defiant insistence on identity, according to the song, is ultimately inefficacious because it has no connection to the world at large. This lack of effect is characteristic of phallic jouissance. In the experience of phallic jouissance, Jacques-Alain Miller notes, "The subject does not give anyone the keys to the castle and sometimes goes so far as to protect himself through being impotent in a satisfying way" (2000, p. 20). P.J. evinces this illusion of autonomy with its corresponding impotence. His show of phallic authority fails to have any effect on the world he encounters, and yet he revels in it. In other words, here Campion depicts desperate and fantasmatic phallic jouissance. Unlike feminine jouissance, phallic jouissance is wholly invested in the symbolic order, despite its appearance of autonomy. P.J.'s jouissance derives from occupying the position of the phallic signifier. The phallic signifier, however, is a signifier without a signified—it is a meaningless symbol, which leads Lacan to say that phallic jouissance is "the jouissance of the idiot" (1998, p. 81).

The comical nature of this scene is clearly tied to the idiocy of his phallic jouissance. In the rest of the film, Campion shoots P.J. in serious, dramatic ways, and his role in the narrative is not comedic.[10] This introduction, however, is typical of Campion's style. It reveals not only elements of the character, and foreshadows his emotional descent, but also comments on American film traditions. Campion creates such moments as part of a film language that isn't necessarily rooted in plot and realism alone—a more expressive film language. This scene illustrates the nature of phallic jouissance and its role in a filmic narrative, which the surreal film technique

9. The very fact that a song by Neil Diamond provides the background for P.J.'s arrival already indicates the illusoriness of P.J.'s display of phallic authority. Despite the defiant and even heroic tone of the song, it nonetheless remains a song by Neil Diamond, whose music almost created the genre of "easy listening."

10. But evidence of the idiotic nature of his phallic jouissance remains present throughout the film in his inability to contain Ruth's jouissance, to retain his position as master.

helps to point out. Phallic jouissance here is tied to fantasy, which in Lacanian terms is a bridge between the imaginary and the symbolic, between the image and the word.[11] P.J. arrives as a master, a figure that can deprogram Ruth and reinsert her into the nuclear family that she is rejecting. Nevertheless, from the beginning we see the role of fantasy here: to cover over the inadequacies of the very symbolic position of the master. In other words, the jouissance of the phallic signifier is used fantasmatically to hide the meaninglessness of the phallus.

*Holy Smoke* investigates the political way in which feminine jouissance disrupts this ideological process by revealing the unanchored nature of the phallic signifier. P.J.'s job, to obliterate Ruth's jouissance, makes sense as a kind of survival mechanism. He begins this job by sequestering her away in a cabin in the Australian outback. This location is important because of the mythical role that the outback has had in the history of Australian films as a battleground to prove masculinity. The outback is normally depicted as a harsh place where masculinity is tested and defined. In *Women and the Bush*, Kay Schaffer, however, contends that the outback's danger and brutality is in many ways connected with fantasies of feminine sexuality. She says, "What is articulated in these constructions about the bush comes not from the bush itself but from the fantasies of those who view it. The bush functions as a locus of desire. Animated by man's desire, it takes on the seeming attributes of women, whether described as a passive landscape or an alien force; a place of exile or belonging; a landscape of promise or threat" (1991, p. 61). In other words, women are not often depicted in the outback because the outback is itself the feminine, that space that men cannot fathom and thus that they fear and/or desire. Thus, many Australian films revolve around a man's quest through the outback. Beaten and relatively unsuccessful, the man

11. It is also within fantasy that the conflicts and contradictions of ideology are smoothed over, but in performing this task the possibility of revealing these contradictions is always present as well. In this way, fantasy acts in the service of ideology but also has the potential to disrupt it.

does at least come out more masculine after his experience: just surviving solidifies his identity. Campion, on the other hand, places a heroine in the outback and makes the vast outback a site of eventual freedom for Ruth.[12] In some ways, then, *Holy Smoke* fits into Australian filmic traditions (albeit from a different angle) by depicting the Australian outback as a site that is replete with feminine jouissance.[13] In *Holy Smoke*, however, this is a female journey that eventually reveals the meaninglessness of the phallic signifier, rather than hiding it.

Initially, the therapy in the outback begins with P.J. in control. P.J. takes Ruth's shoes—so that she can't escape—and begins talking to her about her experiences with her guru. Their debates about religious devotion and some personal emotional experiences are clearly P.J.'s well-practiced path toward deprogramming cult victims. P.J. suggests to Ruth that she has used her guru to replace her father (whose inadequacies were revealed earlier), which begins to unravel Ruth's commitment to the cult. Campion cleverly points out, however, that there are many factors, not just P.J.'s expertise, mitigating Ruth's deprogramming and eventually her second moment of jouissance. For example, in one scene, the camera reveals Ruth alone in front of a mirror watching herself pray. Her attention to her looks seems more in line with a woman putting on makeup than with religious devotion. Campion indicates here that Ruth is playing with a new set of signifiers rather than being wholly ensconced in them. Another moment influential in loosening Ruth's convictions occurs when her family gathers to watch a video about cults. Ruth seems equally traumatized by the images of Charles Manson and Heaven's Gate as by her dysfunc-

12. A foreshadowing of this freedom is the shot of Ruth driving by herself through the desertlike outback singing Alanis Morissette's "All I Really Want" (a song full of female rage) at the top of her lungs.

13. A similar scene occurs in *Sweetie* when the mother sings against the backdrop of the Australian outback as a signifier of the newly found freedom from her husband and children. By shooting the mother's full figure against the expansive outback, Campion and cinematographer Bongers are reconceiving the mother as an active subject and the outback as not exclusively male.

tional family. In this scene, Campion skillfully contrasts these purveyors of meaning (religion and family), each reflecting the other's dysfunctionality.

Ruth and P.J. return to their cabin for rest after viewing the tape with her family. P.J. is awakened that night to find Ruth's sari burning from a pole. P.J. and the audience's attention then focus on the darkened outback landscape and watch, as Ruth emerges completely naked. At this moment, Ruth's fictions about truth and identity once again completely unravel, and she is left with pure jouissance. P.J. tells her that it is okay, that she is on the right path toward breaking through the cult programming. But just after it seems that he has Ruth under control, she urinates as she is walking toward him. Again, Campion marks this presentation of the feminine jouissance with slow motion and audible breathing sounds. Through these filmic techniques, she changes the pace of the scene and marks it as one that reveals Ruth's subjective experience. Her urination reveals her inability at that moment to cling to any symbolic convention, even the most basic that concern controlling your bodily functions. Rather than repulsing P.J., this is what intrigues him, and it is at this moment that he is unable to reject her sexual advances (which have been clear attempts on her part to control their sessions). From this moment on, P.J. begins to question his symbolic identity. As Ruth normalizes, P.J. loses control and becomes obsessed with her.

At this point in *Holy Smoke*, P.J.'s experience of Ruth's feminine jouissance drives him into perversion. Her jouissance first disrupts her family and then disrupts the mastery that P.J. assumes he, as a man and as an American, has over the situation; it entirely disrupts his patriarchal position of mastery and ultimately leads him to adopt the position of the pervert in the hope that he might access her feminine jouissance. As Lacan points out in his *Seminar XIV*, this kind of attempt to engage feminine jouissance inevitably leads to a turn toward perversion. As Lacan puts it, "To pose the question of feminine enjoyment well is already to open the door to all the perverse acts" (1967, my translation). As P.J. loses control and more fully adopts the perverse position, Ruth seems to gain

control, but her "control" is different from P.J.'s. While P.J. wants to control her, Ruth instead wants to push him or beckon him toward jouissance. If jouissance is a falling away of the symbolic, it would be an especially uncomfortable place for P.J., whose existence is so clearly based on his symbolic phallic identity. At this point, Ruth's motivations mimic the theoretical/political trajectory I have been suggesting: She is investigating without a necessary end. She is not sure what will occur but she wants P.J. to experience a new relation to the symbolic order through his body. She dresses him in a red dress and lipstick during their last sexual encounter, which creates a literal manifestation of her disruption. Here P.J. and the outback have turned into a feminine space that Ruth investigates.

Ruth finds a way to escape, and P.J., still wearing the red dress and lipstick, chases after her. Eventually he falls from exhaustion and begins hallucinating. His hallucination is of Ruth, in a scene filled with shimmering gold and red, as a multi-armed Eastern goddess. P.J. has placed Ruth in the position of guru, indicating that what he seeks is her jouissance, not his own. P.J. fantasizes jouissance as love or plenitude, which erases the radical kernel of jouissance. Campion depicts his fetishizing of feminine jouissance as a psychotic breakdown. Here Campion shows that feminine jouissance is not the ultimate answer to all feminist problems. Jouissance is only interesting insofar as it is a momentary unintended experience. In other words, jouissance is not an appropriate idol. Feminine jouissance is, in fact, obliterated if it is fetishized. By making feminine jouissance a signifier in and of itself, its radical nature is erased. This, of course, could be another reason P.J. has his vision—one last effort to gain mastery over feminine jouissance.

Ultimately, Ruth's family saves her from P.J., and the film ends with a brief look at where Ruth and P.J. are a year later. This ending, which seems to suggest Ruth's reentry into her proper symbolic identity, does not totally heal the wounds that were opened up by the film, nor does it successfully present a fantasmatic resolution for these conflicts. This ending, shown in brief snippets and

attached to images of postcards that Ruth and P.J. send each other, is too obviously tacked on and does not present a complete return to the previous order. P.J. still professes his love for Ruth even though he is married and living back in America. And Ruth, now living in India with her mother, is not in a cult but still seems to have questions about spiritual truth (or feminine jouissance). This type of ending is similar to that of other Campion films. In *Sweetie*, Kay and her family can go back to normalcy but only after Sweetie is dead. At the end of *The Piano*, Ada continues to play her piano with a fake finger but more remarkably, she is learning to speak. In other words, she is trying one more time to enter the symbolic order, but the film has already shown what happens when she tried to do this, which means there is no guarantee that this will work either. Typically, narratives end with a sense of closure, a resolution that smoothes out the conflicts and contradictions that may have arisen during the film. In Hollywood, this often means the union of the couple in the film, but even a depiction of such a union (or at least a kind of reconciliation as in *Holy Smoke*) does not serve as an ideological bandage in Campion's films. Instead, these tacked-on, inadequate endings reemphasize the tensions and ideological difficulties in sustaining a romantic relationship or a nuclear family while at the same time allowing for an experience of feminine jouissance.

These moments of feminine jouissance that Campion depicts that so destabilize ideology are not the kind of moments that feminists traditionally talk about as embodying radical politics. They are not actions with political aims; though in some sense extraordinary, they could be said to happen relatively regularly. What Campion has done is to allow the effects of jouissance to be uncovered and thus to expose the changing nature of contemporary feminist politics in a way that defies both past feminism and contemporary antifeminist ideas. Campion's method is best understood in a new approach to feminist film theory, one based on an understanding of the radical potential of feminine jouissance, a feminist film theory that is political through investigation rather than prescription.

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